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THE MISSING MILLION

BY

EDGAR WALLACE

Author of

"Captains of Souls," "Room 13," "The Face in the Night,"
"A King by Night," "The Man from Morocco,"
"The Avenger," etc.

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TO THE MEMBERS OF THE
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THE MISSING MILLION

CHAPTER I

“YOU’VE dropped a flower, sir,” said the beef-eater.

Detective-Inspector James Sepping blushed and looked down guiltily at the three violets that lay on the gravelled parade ground.

He did not look like a detective, and seemed too youthful to hold any such exalted rank. He had the appearance of an athletic young man about town.

“No—don’t pick them up, unless it is against the regulations of the Tower of London to drop flowers around. They look good there.”

The burly Yeoman of the Guard, in his quaint sixteenth century dress, fingered his grey beard and looked suspiciously at the visitor. Jimmy Sepping appeared to be perfectly sober.

“You’re not supposed to drop paper, but there’s nothing about flowers—thank you, sir.”

Jimmy slipped a coin into the man’s hand.

“I’ve an idea I’ve seen you in the Tower before, sir,” said the beef-eater.

“I have been here before,” drawled Jimmy vaguely.

He had brought that drawl from Oxford to the

Metropolitan Police, and it had been the stock joke of the division to which he was drafted in the days when Officer Sepping wore uniform and walked a beat, reciting the Iliad to keep himself awake.

He stood by the flowers until the yeoman strolled away, for he was a sentimentalist, and every year on a certain day he came to the Tower of London to drop a flower on the spot where Fritz Haussman had smiled into a smiling sky. Fritz was a German and a spy. Jimmy had run him to earth and arrested him. Jimmy's evidence had procured his doom. And then one fine morning in May they had brought him out to shoot him, and he came gaily.

"May I smoke a cigarette?" he asked, and the Provost-Marshal gave him permission. He took the cigarette from his case and was returning it to the waistcoat pocket just above his heart, when he stopped and laughed softly.

"That will rather be in your way," he smiled and, finishing his cigarette, he had walked, clear-eyed and still smiling, to the house of death, dying as Jimmy would wish to die, like a gentleman.

So every year came Jimmy to the place where Fritz had stood, and paid homage to manhood.

"Jimmy!"

He turned quickly at the sound of the voice. A girl was looking at him, amusement in her deep blue eyes, a slight figure of a girl.

"Hallo!" he said awkwardly. "You've got your hair up!"

She shook her head reproachfully.

"It is very bad manners to make comments upon a lady's appearance," she said severely. "Of course I've got my hair up. I'm eighteen! What are you doing here?"

He had not seen Joan Walton for two years, and the change in her was amazing. He had never realised before how pretty she was; her self-possession had always been a dominant characteristic, but it had taken the form of a gawky self-assertiveness which had been rather amusing. Joan had suddenly acquired a poise and a dignity which did not seem at all odd or amusing.

"I've come to see the Crown Jewels and the dungeons," he said glibly; "also the tower where the little princes were murdered, and Lady Jane Grey's initials carved on the wall. I'm a born sightseer."

She shook her head.

"I don't believe you. Rex says you are the busiest man in town."

"Is he here?" he asked quickly.

"He is here—*and* Dora. He is dining with you, on the night of nights."

Jimmy chuckled.

"Thursday, isn't it? Yes, I've seen a lot of him lately. What is the matter with him, Joan?"

They were strolling across the quad, and she half turned, making for one of the benches that faced the railed-off space where so many illustrious characters had paid the penalty for treason.

"Sit down—it is an act of providence meeting you. Jimmy, I owe you so much penitence—I won't say apologies. I used to be horrid to you about your being a policeman. It seemed so funny at the time——"

"Woman, you are forgiven," said Jimmy magnificently. "The jibes of childhood pass me by, and the pertness of adolescent pulchritude is as the droppings of the gentle rain."

"You are being rude—and I hate those long words . . . Jimmy, do you think Rex should marry so soon after Edie's death ? "

The smile left Jimmy's face.

" I don't know . . ." he said slowly. " It is nearly two years, and it would hardly be fair to expect Rex to remain all his life faithful to her memory."

The girl's brows knit, and he saw the little hands clench more tightly about the handle of her parasol.

" Why cannot you find this horrible man ? " she demanded vehemently. " It is disgraceful that he should be at large, Jimmy ! Oh, it was wicked, wicked ! "

Jimmy Sepping did not answer. The anonymous letter writer was a difficult proposition in any circumstances, but " Kupie " was no ordinary criminal. The day before Edith Branksome's marriage, she had been found dead, with a phial of prussic acid in her hand and a letter lying on the floor by the side of the bed. It had been a typical Kupie letter, setting forth cold-bloodedly an escapade of the dead girl that none suspected.

" We have done our best," said Jimmy quietly. " Kupie is something more than a spiteful letter writer. There is a big business end to him. He has blackmailed half the prominent men and women in town, and poor Edie is only one whom he has sent to a suicide's grave." And then, to change the subject : " You like Dora, don't you ? "

She nodded.

" I'm being a cat even to suggest that the wedding should be postponed. Rex is madly in love with her, and he is very fond of Mr. Coleman. But Rex is worried, Jimmy."

She shot a warning glance at him and, turning his head, he saw Rex Walton coming toward them.

With him was a girl whose arresting beauty never failed to arouse in the heart of Jimmy Sepping a new admiration. She was tall and fair. Her hair was of that rich golden tint that mothers strive to retain in their children, the live gold of youth. Grey eyes that held the graveness of wisdom, a complexion untouched by artifice. She smiled and waved her hand in greeting, and Jimmy rose to meet her.

Rex Walton was dark, broad-shouldered, and a little sombre of countenance. He was eight years the girl's senior—exactly Jimmy's age—and the two men had been at Charterhouse together, had gone up to Oxford in the same term, and had remained fast friends in spite of Rex Walton's enormous wealth and Jimmy's comparative poverty.

"What on earth are you doing here, Jimmy?" demanded the new-comer.

"Don't ask him," pleaded his sister. "Jimmy has the habit of evasion strongly developed."

"He'll tell me the truth," said the other girl as she sat down. "I think the Tower is wonderful, but it is a little tiring—and there are the dungeons to see."

"See them with Joan," said Rex Walton quickly. "I want to talk to Jimmy."

When Rex was worried, he was brusque and almost uncouth in his manner. Apparently his fiancée had already suffered from his mood, for she accepted his suggestion without question.

"I've been a brute this morning," said Rex when they were left alone, "and if Dora hadn't the sweetest temper in the world, she would have gone home. Jimmy' I'm rattled! I wish to heaven I could tell you everything!"

"About Kupie?" asked the other quietly.

"Yes . . . that and more. I've been a fool . . yet perhaps I haven't. If I thought I had been a fool I shouldn't be asking your advice. And I can't even ask you now without breaking a confidence."

Rex Walton was a queer mixture of strength and weakness. His simplicity was proverbial, his physical courage had won him a colonelcy in the war, and there was hardly room on his broad chest for the string of decorations he had earned. The only son of a steel magnate, he had inherited a fortune running to the proximity of a million sterling, and his wealth, as Jimmy knew, was one of the principal sources of his worry. Rex had inherited the fortune without a scrap of his father's business quality. He was a mark for every swindling company promoter, a shining target which no begging-letter writer ever missed. Any plausible scoundrel was assured of his sympathy and help—any man who served with him in the war took money automatically.

"Have you had another letter?" asked Jimmy.

For answer, Rex took forth his pocket-case and drew out a grey-tinted sheet of notepaper.

"This morning," he said tersely.

Jimmy smelt the paper. It had the smoky fragrance which was characteristic of all Kupie's epistles, and bore neither date nor address. It ran:

If you marry Dora Coleman, I will reduce you to beggary. However secure your money may be, you cannot keep it from me. This is the last time I shall warn you.

K.

Jimmy handed the letter back.

"He has said nothing about Dora . . . no rakings up from the past?" he asked.

"No—what do you think of it?"

"Twiff," said Jimmy contemptuously. "How can they take your money?"

Rex shifted uneasily in his seat.

"He took Pelmar's," he said. "I had a talk with—with a man who knows a great deal about this scoundrel, and he takes a more serious view than you."

"Who was that?" asked the detective curiously.

"It wouldn't be fair to say—in fact, I promised I would not mention that I had spoken. He advised me——" He stopped.

"Was it somebody important—an official?"

"Yes—somebody big at Scotland Yard."

Jimmy whistled, and the other went on hurriedly.

"I should have spoken to you, but I met this other man in peculiar circumstances. He wasn't very keen on discussing the matter because he's scared of Kupie too."

"Who was it?" insisted Jimmy, but here Rex was obstinately silent.

"Take no notice of the letters," said Jimmy. "That's about the tenth you've received since your engagement was announced, isn't it? Kupie is clever, but not all-powerful. There are some things he cannot do. Does Dora know?"

He nodded.

"She takes the same view as you, but sometimes she gets very frightened, and that hurts me. Jimmy, can't the police get this swine?"

Jimmy did not reply for some time, and then:

"I'd give a lot of money to know the police officer who advised you to take Kupie seriously," he said.

CHAPTER II

IN Room 375, at two o'clock punctually, the Big Three met in committee to discuss the profit and loss of the week. And invariably Bill Dicker was in the chair, and as invariably Jimmy Sepping acted as secretary, for he was the junior of the three. Miller, a dark, unemotional man, was the third.

Every week between the hours of two and four the Big Three discussed the week's "trading," examined profit and loss, compared plans for the coming week and passed under review the reports of subordinates.

No. 375 was not a very large office, and in spite of opened windows and electric fans the atmosphere was usually blue, for these men were great smokers of pipes—all except Sepping, who had a weakness for the brown cylinders of peace which Havana produces in large quantities.

On this bright May afternoon the sun was shining through the oriel windows, and there was a disposition on the part of the committee to let their eyes wander to the glittering river and the leisurely stream of traffic which passed up and down; to the vivid green of the spring foliage which fringed the broad boulevard of the Embankment; to the sweep of the County Council's gay new palace on the other side of the river—to anything except the trivialities which occupied or were designed to occupy their attention.

Only Bill Dicker, huddled up in his big chair at the head of the table, a picture of gloomy thought, never allowed his eyes to wander.

"What about that job at Greenwich?" asked the round-headed Miller, making a laudable attempt to galvanise the assembly into life.

"Harry Feld did that," replied Dicker sombrely. "By the way, Jimmy, you might mark the officer who sent the account to head-quarters; recommend him for promotion—he has probably got the necessary certificate. A smart man; the report he sent was a model of its kind. Yes, Feld did the robbery; he was pulled in this afternoon. Queer how these fellows specialise—Feld, I mean. He has never stolen anything in his life but bolts of cloth. I suppose he knows where to 'fence' it."

"The Hertford murder hasn't come on to our books?" asked Jimmy.

Dicker shook his head.

"They haven't asked for assistance. The Hertford police never call in head-quarters until they've let the trail get all trodden up."

Miller rose and stretched himself.

"That's about all, chief?" he asked. "By the way, we've located the factory where those American bills are made—but you had that in my report."

Bill Dicker nodded.

"I'm hoping we'll get this crowd, anyway. When Tony Frascati got away with a hundred thousand sterling we didn't shine, Joe. I still think that somebody at central office tipped him off."

There was no significance in his words; they were addressed to the room; it was almost as though he was speaking his thoughts aloud. But the dark face of Chief Inspector Miller flushed a deep red.

"I was in charge of the case, sir," he said stiffly, and when any of the Big Three addressed one another as "sir," there was trouble brewing. "We made every effort to catch Tony—I myself was at Dover watching the cross-Channel boats——"

"Surely," said Bill with one of his infrequent smiles. "It might have happened to any of us. Tony, being a forger on the grand scale, must have got one of our men squared. You couldn't help that, Joe. Anyway, Tony's dead—and it's seven years ago."

"I offered my resignation——" began Miller, but the other stopped him with a gesture.

"Forget it. We all have our failures. There is only one other matter," he said slowly, "and, Jimmy, you're interested in this: Kupie!"

"Lord, Bill, I forgot that you were going," said Jimmy in dismay. "And I wanted to talk to you about Kupie."

"And that was the one matter *I* wished to speak about," said Bill Dicker, rubbing his nose thoughtfully. "Kupie has to be stopped. You read what the Westminster coroner said about the Shale case? That's the second suicide this year, and there will be others. We can't have any idea how many people Kupie is after. I've been forty-three years in the police service, and I could count my failures on one hand. That sounds like boasting, but it isn't. There isn't a crook living that I've been after and haven't got. The four I didn't get are dead, anyway."

Chief Superintendent William Dicker spoke no more than the truth. Wherever convict met convict, they testified to his genius, his cunning, his ruthlessness. Men had walked dazed to the death house, the memory of his dour face present in their minds, even with the dangling rope before their eyes, his last grim jest overriding the whispered exhortations of the surpliced minister who attended them.

It was to Bill Dicker, who served before the mast of a windjammer for nine hellish months before rounding the Horn on the homeward trip, that Charles Barser, the bos'n, confided his share in the Telmark murder. Barser was drunk, and it was in the middle watch, when men are not normal—but he went to the gallows on Bill Dicker's evidence.

"But Kupie has me rattled," he went on in his slow way. "It is a reproach to the police that this should be so, even though only a few of his victims have squealed."

"There won't be so many more squealing either," said Jimmy, lighting his cigar again. "Do you remember that City man that came here and wanted us to get back the letters he'd written to a chorus girl?"

"He hasn't been since—what happened?" asked Dicker.

"Kupie had the letters reproduced and printed. Every pal of his had a copy—his wife, his mother, his business associates, banker—everybody that counted. Kupie only circularised one of the letters—the City man paid. I had Collett up here to-day—Lawford Collett, the lawyer who had the case in hand. He says he advised the fellow not to pay a cent, but he's settled: cost him eight thousand. That is the new terror which he has introduced."

"Are there any fresh cases?" asked Dicker.

"Walton—but that isn't fresh," said Jimmy. "He has my poor friend rattled too. By the way, Miller," he turned suddenly to the dark-visaged man on his right, " you don't know Walton, do you ? "

" Slightly," said the other.

" Have you ever spoken to him ? "

" I may have done—why ? "

There was resentment in his tone.

" He was telling me that somebody had advised him to take Kupie seriously. Somebody who seems to have pitched a ghost story about Kupie's omnipotence."

Miller's face was dark.

" I don't know what you mean by ' ghost story,' " he said sharply. " I certainly advised Mr. Walton to take a certain action which had been suggested to him. If you think Kupie——"

" Now, you fellows, don't snarl at one another," Bill Dicker interrupted. " I've a great respect for the power of Kupie : he has surely a fund of information about people——"

He stopped as the door opened and a uniformed constable came in, a letter in his hand.

" For me ? " said Miller. He tore open the envelope and took out two sheets of typewritten matter. Dicker was talking to Jimmy when he heard the cry, and spun round. Miller was standing by the window, one hand at his throat, the other grasping the letter. His saturnine face was dead white, his eyes staring wildly.

" For God's sake ! " said Bill Dicker, springing to the man's side. " What's wrong, Miller ? "

Miller shook his head.

" Nothing . . . nothing," he said huskily. " Excuse me . . . "

He went out quickly ; they heard the door of his room close, and the two men looked at one another.

"What's the matter with Miller—bad news?"

Jimmy shook his head helplessly.

"I don't know. He isn't married, so it can't be family trouble. You know what he is; he never takes you into his——"

He stopped. The sound of the shot came distinctly, and in another second he was across the passage and was at Miller's door. It was locked.

"Pass-key," said Dicker tersely, and Jimmy fled down the corridor. He was back almost immediately and Dicker unlocked the door and threw it wide open.

A thin blue wisp of smoke hung in the air, moving slowly. On the hearthrug lay Miller, a revolver clenched in his hand.

Jimmy saw the burning paper in the grate, and, stooping, blew out the flame. Only one particle of the paper remained.

"He's dead," said Dicker. "What's that? Break off the unburnt bit—we'll have the ashes photographed."

Jimmy Sepping laid the charred scrap on the desk and in seven words and a half-burnt picture it told its story.

Fifty thousand . . .
Tony Fra . . .
Escape . . .
Banked . . .
Norwich . . .

Beneath was a part of the letter *K*.

"He banked at Norwich—I know that," said Dicker, and put his foot on the ashes in the grate. "And he let Tony go for half the loot; I guessed that too. And Kupie knew it."

He struck a match and burnt the scrap of paper. When it was ashes he dropped it into the grate.

" Never mind about that photographer, Jimmy," he said. " We'd better say he'd been strange in his manner lately—the service must come first."

He stooped and patted the dead man's shoulder.

" Poor fellow ! " he said gently. " I'll get Kupie, Miller, and get him good ! "

CHAPTER III

"IF the detection of crime was as simple as the average detective story, I should solve all the mysteries of the world before I got out of bed," said Jimmy Sepping. "It is a pretty simple business, once all the characters have been introduced and you've had an opportunity of studying their various peculiarities, to narrow your suspicions down to two or three people. Obviously, the villain of the piece cannot be the open-faced hero with the curly hair, however damning the evidence may be against him. As obviously it cannot be the pure, blue-eyed heroine, or the inevitable friend of the family."

Rex Walton laughed softly and filled his glass from the long-necked bottle. He was dining at Jimmy's flat, and he was very ready to find life amusing, for it was the last night of his bachelorhood. Jimmy went on.

"If all villains were tall, dark men, who wore cloaks and sombreros and a sinister expression, and blue eyes were invariably a proof of innocence, life would run very smoothly—wait!"

He got up from the table and went out of the room, returning with a bulky volume under his arm. Clearing a space by the side of his guest, he laid the book down and opened it. It was a scrap-book in which were pasted photographs of men and women interiors and exteriors of houses, letters, scraps of pencilled writings, rough plans, and, on one page, a few pressed flowers.

" Look at that man."

His finger touched the portrait of a smiling young man with deep-set, intelligent eyes.

" That is Ballon, the Gateshead murderer. He killed four women and disposed of their bodies so cleverly that we never found one. Who would you say that was ? "

He touched another portrait. It was that of a man, broad-faced, menacing.

" Notice the small eyes, the irregular-shaped nose, the loose lower lip ? "

" Another murderer," suggested Rex, and Jimmy chuckled.

" Chief Inspector Carter, who arrested Ballon—Carter is a bachelor who spends all his money on running a crèche for poor children ! "

He turned a leaf.

" Is that a good woman or a bad woman ? " He pointed to another picture.

Rex shook his head.

" She looks a commonplace, middle-class woman to me," he said. " I should think it was a portrait of an old housekeeper or a faithful family retainer."

" Jessie Heinz—baby farmer," said the other briefly. " She killed seven children and was hanged at Cardiff."

He closed the book with a bang.

" When the police arrive on the scene in a murder case, they come into contact with the body of somebody unknown to them. All that body stands for, all its hates and fears and loves, all the complex of its life, are unknown. The strings that bound it to the world are cut. You have to work back and reconstitute its associations."

Rex Walton looked thoughtfully at the end of his cigar and gently tapped the ash into the coffee saucer.

"I wish to heaven you could reconstruct Kupie—and kill him," he said savagely.

Jimmy looked up quickly.

"I have tried, and so far failed. If you are normal you can never get into the mind of an anonymous letter writer. Kupie is more than that, I admit. He is a most expert blackmailer, but not all his letters are written for profit. Sheer wicked malice is behind half his letters."

"Go on," said Rex Walton quietly. "It always hurts, and to-night, of all nights, I should keep the matter out of my mind."

"I'm sorry; I had forgotten," said Jimmy, and tried to turn the subject.

"It was malice that made him kill Miller——"

Rex jumped from his chair as though he had been shot.

"Miller—which Miller? Not the Scotland Yard man? Good God!"

The terror in his blanched face was a revelation to Jimmy.

"You knew him? He was the man you consulted about this villain's warning?"

Rex nodded.

"Do you think . . . he was killed for that? How did they——"

"He committed suicide. I tell you this in confidence, Rex, because the part that Kupie played is not public property and never will be. They found something about him, something discreditable."

Rex shook his head wildly.

"It wasn't that," he cried, "it wasn't that! He was killed because he helped me. Because . . ."

"Well?" asked Jimmy as the man paused.

Rex Walton took out his pocket-handkerchief and wiped his streaming forehead.

"I shall be glad when to-morrow is over," he said as he poured out another glass of wine (his hand was shaking, Jimmy noted and wondered). "Zero hour never got me like this, though I've seen men paralysed with fear. But we knew what was on the other side of No-Man's-Land. Kupie is unknown."

Then suddenly he laughed.

"I'm a fool," he said. "The thing I am afraid of can't happen—now."

Jimmy was instantly alert.

"Why not 'now'?" he asked.

At that instant there was a knock at the door, and his manservant came in.

"Miss Coleman and Miss Walton," he announced.

Dora looked lovely in a wrap of crimson velvet; pretty Joan Walton, with her bobbed hair and her virile face, almost suffered by contrast.

"This is not my idea of a bachelors' dinner," said Dora, a smile in her eyes. "Yet I'm sure you have not been dull, Rex."

Walton helped her out of the crimson theatre wrap she was wearing.

"No, I'm never dull with old Jim," he said, and there was nothing in his voice that would betray the strain he endured.

"What have you been talking about? Crime and murder, and things of that kind?" asked Joan. "Nobody ever helps me with my wrap—don't trouble, Jimmy."

She flung her cloak on to the sofa and pulled up a chair.

" The play was bad, and Dora was so full of her own thoughts that I couldn't even get her to say unpleasant things about the leading actor," she said. " What is that ? "

She made to open the book on the table, but Jimmy stopped her.

" Not for little girls," he said. " It is my little book of horrors."

" Do let me see it," pleaded Joan, her eyes dancing. " There can't be anything more tragical in it than ' Sundered Lives.' "

" I thought ' Sundered Lives ' was a comedy ? "

" It is supposed to be," said Joan, and helped herself to a cigarette. " I feel in harmony with the criminal classes to-night. Observe the pained look in Dora's eyes ! "

Dora Coleman laughed quietly.

" I'm not at all pained. You've been trying to shock me all the evening, but I absolutely refuse to so much as raise an eyebrow."

" My dear Joan," said Walton, with a little touch of irritation in his voice, " I do wish that you wouldn't bother Dora."

" It's good for Dora to be shocked," said Joan calmly.

She glanced over the table, picked up the wine bottle and read the label with a grimace.

" Dr. Budsteiner ? How very dull ! " she said. " I thought on such occasions as these the good yellow wine of Champagne was the only admissible drink. Jimmy, have you been giving him good advice ? "

" I never offer advice to young married people, or young about-to-be-married people," said Jimmy.

"It does not come within the province of a police officer."

Dora had taken a grape from the table and was nibbling it thoughtfully.

"Did Rex tell you his secret?"

Jimmy's eyebrows rose.

"I didn't know that he had a secret," he said truthfully.

"He has secret plans for the honeymoon," interrupted Joan with an extravagant flourish of her cigarette. "It is to be a honeymoon like no other honeymoon ever was! Nothing so commonplace as a journey to Venice; no flying off to the wilds of Scotland; no disappearance to Paris." She turned to her brother, laughter in her eyes. "Tell us now, Rex; you're amongst friends. I swear——" She wetted her finger and drew it with a suggestive gesture across her throat.

"You can swear until your eyes grow green," said her brother complacently. "That is my own mystery, which I share with nobody. It is a secret I shall tell my bride immediately after we leave the registrar. Now, young people, I'll take you home. You'll be at Portland Place to-morrow? We're having the wedding breakfast beforehand—I've told you that about three times. Then we go on to the registrar's office. No wedding presents, Jimmy." He raised a warning finger.

"Even the wedding present to the bride is a mystery," said Joan. "Personally, I insist upon giving a silver-plated cruet. It is an invariable practice of mine, and one from which I will not depart. People aren't properly married unless they have silver cruets—it's part of the ceremony."

Jimmy escorted them to the entrance of Halliwell House, the block of flats in which he lived, and watched on the sidewalk until the car had disappeared. As he stood there a man passed hurriedly and, stepping back, Jimmy came into collision.

"Sorry," said Jimmy, but the man hurried on without a word.

Jimmy went back to the deserted dining-room. Putting his hand into the pocket of his dinner-jacket to find his match-box, his fingers touched something unusual and he drew it out. It was a tiny celluloid doll of familiar pattern, a "Kupie" with staring eyes and smirking lips. About its little middle was a white ribbon sash on which had been written:

Keep out and stay out.

He looked at the tiny doll in amazement.

"Where the devil did that come from?" he demanded.

CHAPTER IV

MR. THEOPHILUS COLEMAN stood at one of the windows of his handsome dining-room overlooking Portland Place, and he was not in the best of humours. He was (as he told his associates at the Treasury) a creature of habit, due largely to his long association with a Government office. He rose at seven every morning of his life and walked the length of Portland Place four times. It mattered not whether the weather was fair or foul, snowing or lightning, blowing or sweltering. He took his constitutional, wearing, in the summer, a thin alpaca coat, and, in the winter, a very yellow jumper, which interested such milkmen, policemen and members of the working classes as were abroad at that hour.

At nine o'clock he breakfasted, having disposed of his meagre mail and read the first leader in *The Times*, that his views on the political situation might be brought up to date. Mr. Coleman never played golf, and remained (he confessed) a devotee to whist. In conversation he favoured a high tariff, a big navy and long skirts ; his chief detestations were Socialism, Popular Education and America. To these causes, he argued, all the ills and evils of life and circumstance might be traced, and indeed were traced by Mr. Coleman.

He was a man of few inches, stout and very bald

He wore fluffy grey side-whiskers, until one day, seeing by chance the portrait of a film star similarly, though more tidily, adorned, he was seized with misgiving. On learning that the screen artist was American, Mr. Coleman summoned his valet and peremptorily ordered the removal of the hateful appendage.

His face was rosy, his skin clear, and his many chins added to his appearance of comfort. During the war he had passed to the sinecure of an assistant secretaryship in the Treasury. And here, from ten o'clock in the morning until four o'clock in the afternoon, he initialled documents and passed them on to a superior, who also initialled them. Somewhere between Mr. Coleman and the chief of his department was a person who actually read them. Mr. Coleman had never been sufficiently interested to discover who was this painstaking individual.

Passing into the Treasury as a voluntary worker in the strenuous days of war, his services had not been dispensed with, and for an excellent reason. His salary was small. He had the manner and style of the prosperous Civil Servant, and there were many who thought he had been born in the Treasury.

This morning his habits were broken by the unusual event of a wedding. The small table at which he and his daughter would usually have sat and discussed a stately breakfast with stately views on the political situation and the movements of Canadian Pacific Railway stock, was replaced with a very much larger table smothered with flowers and glittering with glass and silver. Mr. Coleman felt he had been tricked out of his breakfast.

" Have Mr. Walton's trunks arrived ? " he asked the grey-haired servitor.

" Yes, sir ; they came early this morning. I have taken the liberty of laying out Mr Walton's going-away suit."

Mr. Coleman eyed him disapprovingly.

"Gentlemen do not have going-away suits, Parker. They have morning suits and dress suits and lounge suits. You have laid out Mr. Walton's lounge suit?"

"Yes, sir."

"When Mr. Walton returns after the ceremony you will assist him to change, Parker. I have no doubt he will tip you liberally. He is a gentleman of extravagant habits—good morning, my dear."

He addressed his daughter, who had come into the room at that moment.

Few women look their best in the morning, but Dora Coleman was one of them. She looked very young and childlike as she crossed to her father and kissed him.

"Slept well, eh? Happy is the bride that the sun shines on, and it's raining, by gad!"

"I shall be happy," she said as she smiled into his eyes.

Lawford Collett arrived at that moment. A successful lawyer, he had the additional distinction of being Mr. Coleman's legal adviser. The fact that he was also Mr. Coleman's only nephew and Dora's cousin, was less important. As Mr. Coleman's legal adviser he had an importance which transcended all other distinctions in Mr. Coleman's eyes.

Rex Walton and his sister, with Jimmy Sepping, came together, and Rex was obviously nervous and distrait. His face lightened as he went to meet his bride, and for a while they stood together in the window recess, talking.

"Ah, Captain Sepping." Outside of Scotland Yard, only Mr. Coleman ever remembered Jimmy's military title. "Come to look after the wedding presents, eh?"

When Mr. Coleman jested, he jested ponderously and supplied his own subdued laughter. Jimmy smiled politely. "I understand there are no wedding presents," he said, and Mr. Coleman nodded gravely.

"Very wise, very wise indeed," he said. "Walton is a very rich man. Why rob his friends? What could we give him that he could not buy himself?"

"Fish knives," said Joan calmly. "Nobody *ever* buys their own fish knives. I've brought 'em with me."

Mr. Coleman did not like Joan. He never attempted to disguise his antipathy. She represented all that was modern, all that was vulgar in womanhood. She smoked cigarettes, she played games, she danced, not the stately dances that Mr. Coleman's grandmother danced, but violent and indelicate jazzes, and she was pert.

"Everybody is here—Parker!"

He nodded significantly, and walking to where Dora and Rex Walton were standing, he led her by the hand to her chair.

Jimmy was on Joan's right, Lawford Collett on his left.

"Have you wheedled out of Rex the honeymoon route?" he asked, turning to the girl.

She shook her head.

"He's as dumb as an oyster. I don't even know the bridegroom-to-bride present. It is something awfully rich and rare, because the jewellers have been living at Cadogan Square for the past month, and I know that Rex rejected a pearl necklace worth thousands because it wasn't good enough."

She looked at the bride and sighed, and Jimmy guessed the reason.

"You are thinking of somebody—I don't think I should if I were you," he said in a low voice, and she nodded her agreement.

" I'm very fond of Dora—she's lovely and so sweet. But Edie was a very dear friend of ours. I wish Rex hadn't married . . . so soon after. I know he is still fond of her, and I'm really glad he is marrying."

She changed the subject abruptly and was her old gay self in a few minutes.

The programme of the morning was a simple one. The marriage ceremony was to be performed at the Marylebone Register Office, after which the bride and bridegroom were to return to Portland Place and change. Walton's big sports car, laden with their baggage, would be waiting, and the happy couple would drive away to their unknown destination.

Jim caught his friend's eye and Rex smiled. He was happy in spite of his overnight fears. He could hardly take his eyes from the radiant girl who sat at Mr. Coleman's right hand.

And then that worthy man rose, glass in hand.

" I bet he'll start ' My dear friends,' " whispered Joan.

" I'll take that bet," said Jimmy in the same tone, and lost instantly.

" My dear friends," said Mr. Coleman, " on this occasion, when two—er—loving hearts are to be united in the holy bonds of—er—matrimony, it behoves us to wish them the prosperity and happiness which—er——"

He finished at last to a murmur of applause.

The deferential Parker bent over Rex Walton's chair and whispered something in his ear.

"Why is Rex going out?" asked Joan in surprise, as Walton went out of the room.

Apparently neither Mr. Coleman nor the bride thought his retirement unusual. Jim saw Mr. Coleman beckon Parker to him, and there was a brief exchange of question and answer. Mr. Coleman nodded his head and spoke to Dora, who said something inaudible to Jimmy, but which Joan heard.

"He asked Parker to remind him when it was ten minutes past ten," she said uneasily. "I wish he wouldn't do these things. He has a passion for surprising people—I suppose that he has gone to get his wedding present."

Five minutes passed . . . ten minutes, and Rex Walton had not returned. Mr. Coleman looked at his watch.

"Our young friend should be reminded that he has an important engagement at ten-thirty," he said jocularly.

Another five minutes went by, and then Parker went out of the room, to return almost immediately.

"Mr. Walton is not in the house, sir," he said.

And the search that followed failed to discover Rex Walton. He had vanished, and nobody had seen him go.

CHAPTER V

JIM followed Parker up the stairs to the room which had been set aside for Rex Walton to change. A glance told him that the change had been effected, for the morning coat and striped trousers which Walton had worn were lying over the back of a chair.

" His overcoat has gone, sir," said Parker suddenly, " and his hat."

" What is the next room to this ? " asked Jim, coming outside.

" That is Miss Coleman's own room, sir." The butler opened the door and showed a large and pretty bedroom. On the floor were two suit-cases, packed, and evidently ready for the contemplated trip. On the bed was a large dressing-bag, which was closed.

" Did you bring him up, or did he come by himself ? "

" I showed him the way up, sir. He asked me to remind him when it was ten minutes past ten, because he wanted to go upstairs for something."

" Not to change ? "

The butler shook his head.

" No, sir ; Mr. Walton was changing on his return."

" Could he come downstairs without being seen by any of the servants ? "

The butler hesitated.

"I don't know, sir; I will inquire."

Whilst Jim was conducting a search of the apartment, the butler went to make his investigations and returned with the news that no sign of the bridegroom had been seen in the lower hall.

"He could not very well have come down, sir, because two of the chauffeurs were waiting in the porch outside, and they have seen nothing of him."

"Is there any other way out?"

"There's a servants' stairway," said the butler, and led him to a corner at the end of the passage, where a narrow, circular stairway led to the basement kitchen. On the level of the first floor was a door. Jim tried the handle, and it opened. Outside was a small courtyard and another door.

"Where does that lead?" asked Jim

"To the mews, sir. There are garages and stables at the back."

Sepping crossed the flagged yard and found that this second door was also open. It was raining heavily now, and the mews was deserted. In spite of the downpour, Jim walked to the end of the thoroughfare without, however, discovering anybody who had seen the missing bridegroom. He returned to the dining-room. Dora looked white and ill, but if Joan Walton was pale, she was self-possessed.

"What has happened, Jimmy?" she asked.

"I can't understand it," he said, shaking his head. "Had Rex any money with him?"

She nodded.

"He had a very large sum—three or four thousand pounds in notes," she said. "He told me that this morning, but wouldn't tell me why such a large sum was necessary."

"Are you perfectly sure he has left the house?"

asked Mr. Coleman incredulously. "It is impossible! I've always thought of Mr. Walton as a man of honour, who would——"

"There is no need to alter your opinion of Mr. Walton," said Jim quietly. "He has not left the house of his own free will; of that I am sure."

He went up again to make an examination of the missing man's pockets. They had been emptied, and, with the exception of a banknote in one of the waistcoat pockets, and which had evidently been overlooked in the hurry of changing, he found no money. Why had Rex changed his clothes? The plan was for him to be married in the morning suit he had been wearing when he came to Portland Place, and to change afterwards. That was the most puzzling feature of the situation. If Rex Walton had been removed by force, if he had been captured and carried from the house, he certainly would not have changed his clothes to oblige his captors. If the change had disappeared, and his other suit had not been left behind, that would have explained a great deal.

When he got back to the dining-room, he thought it was expedient to tell of the warning which Rex had received.

"Do you think he has been taken away?"

It was Dora who asked the question, and her voice was low and steady, her beautiful eyes fixed gravely upon the detective's face.

"I want you to tell me the truth, Captain Sepping. Last night did Rex express the slightest wish that he was not going to be married?"

"On the contrary," said Jim instantly, "he was a very happy man, and his only concern was for your welfare."

Mr. Coleman, his face distorted as though he were summoning all his physical as well as his mental powers to absorb this problem, was to Jim a pathetic figure of helplessness.

" These sort of things do not happen, my dear sir," he said testily. " Unless Mr. Walton is in the house, he has left of his own free will."

" I think the police had better be summoned," said Jim.

" That means a scandal," said Mr. Coleman with a violent gesture. " The police must not be called in until we have investigated this matter so far as it is humanly possible. Perhaps he has returned to his own house."

Jim had thought of that too, but a telephone call put through to Cadogan Place brought no satisfactory reply.

Jim escorted Joan Walton home. The missing man had not returned, and no news had come of him.

" Poor Dora ! " said the girl, with tears in her eyes. " How terrible, how terrible ! Jimmy, do you think he has gone mad ? "

Jimmy shook his head.

" Do you think he's in any danger ? "

" I don't know. The thing is so inexplicable," said Jim. " K. has never killed—as yet. And Rex is not the sort of man who would be driven to suicide."

" There is nothing in his past, Jimmy . . . ? " she asked anxiously.

" Nothing," said Jimmy promptly. ' I know the whole of his life's history. I think there is hardly a secret between us. In fact, the only thing I don't know about him is where he was going on his honeymoon," he added, and regretted his flippancy when he saw the girl's face.

He went back to his own flat, procured the label of the Kupie that he had found in his pocket, and unearthed a small book which he had had at school. It was a book whose plain pages were disfigured by innumerable smudges, for there had at one period been a craze in Charterhouse for collecting thumb-prints.

At Scotland Yard the finger-print expert lost little time in removing any doubt Jim may have had.

" The thumb-print on the label and that in your book, sir, are entirely different," he said. " Neither the left nor the right in the book corresponds with that on the label."

Jim heaved a sigh of relief. For a second he had had the wildest suspicions.

" Take mine," he suggested, and when the imprint of his own thumb had been made, the inspector in charge shook his head.

" No, sir, it isn't your print either."

He drove to Chelsea, and Joan came into the big hall of Rex Walton's beautiful house to meet him.

" No news ? " she asked.

" None, I'm afraid. I should like to have a talk with his valet. It struck me that he might be able to help us. Rex may have said something to him."

She nodded.

" I'll send for him," she said. " Come in, Jimmy. I'm most unhappy. I think something serious has happened to Rex."

" On the contrary, I do not," said Jim, lying bravely, but he saw that he did not deceive her. " What is the valet's name ? "

" William Wells," she answered. " He's an oldish man. He's been Rex's valet for years, and he's devoted to him."

The footman she had sent to look for William returned with the news that the man had gone out.

" Gone out ? " she said in surprise.

" He went out to get a paper, madam," said the footman, " and he hasn't come back."

" When was this ? " she asked.

" Early this morning, about ten o'clock, madam," was the reply.

CHAPTER VI

JIMMY waited an hour, but the man did not return. His clothes were still in his room; he had left a letter to a brother in Canada half finished, so apparently he had no intention of going away. The day passed, however, without his returning. That night Jim Sepping circulated a description of the two men to all newspapers. Every police station in the country was warned to be on the look-out for Rex. Railway termini were watched, without, however, producing anything more than a batch of rumours.

Late that night Jimmy saw Bill Dicker at Scotland Yard, and Dicker took a most serious view of the happening.

"It was only a question of time before they took other measures than blackmailing," he said. "Is Walton worth a lot of money?"

"He is nearly a millionaire," said Jimmy.

Bill Dicker nodded.

"They won't kill him; I'm certain of that. They'll hold him to ransom, and we shall get demands for fabulous sums of money."

"I think you may be up against the worst crowd in the world," said Dicker thoughtfully; "and it's an old-established business—remember that, Jimmy. It has its offices well fixed, and its mistakes well corrected. That is why we catch criminals, because the average crime is an experiment. And if the experiment succeeds, in a few years' time you'll find it more and more difficult to capture your man, because he has cut out all his mistakes. He has his permanent addresses and branch offices—I'm only speaking figuratively, of course—and he has found a routine of evasion. That's the most important asset of all. We've tried to trap Kupie times without number, but he's wise to all the elementary methods of detection that we can think up in Scotland Yard. And if you break through to his underground tunnel, look out! He's going to stop at nothing, because he knows that, the day he's captured, he's a prisoner for life. And if I know him rightly, he'd rather swing. Have you found that valet?"

Jim shook his head.

"That's curious," mused Bill Dicker, rubbing his chin. "What is his record?"

"A very good one, so far as I can trace him," said Jim. "He was an artificer in the navy until he went into Walton's service, first as chauffeur and then as valet."

"Any relations?"

"A brother in Canada. We've cabled him, but he has not had any communication."

"Humph! How is the young lady taking it—Miss Coleman?"

"Splendidly," said Jim with enthusiasm.

And, really, Dora Coleman had been a model of courage and patience.

Dicker sat for a long time, staring out of the window on to the grey Embankment, and then:

"You'll laugh when I tell you that Kupie is going to be a real enemy of society. You think he is now, but you've only seen the beginning of his villainy. What is your theory about the disappearance of Walton ? "

" I have none," said Jim frankly. " I confess I'm absolutely at sea. Rex is not the kind of man who would do a thing for effect."

When he got back to his flat he found Dora and her father waiting for him.

" Has anything happened ? " he asked quickly. " Has he appeared ? "

The girl shook her head sadly.

" No, he has not appeared—only this."

She held out a leather jewel-case, and Jim, opening it, was startled for a moment by the splendour and beauty of the diamond plaque which rested on the velvet-lined interior.

" Phew ! " he whistled. " Where did you get that ? "

" Dora found it in her dressing-case," said Mr. Coleman solemnly, " and I have reason to believe that it was purchased by Rex Walton. In fact," said Mr. Coleman, " I have made very careful inquiries from the jeweller whose name you will see in the case, and there is no doubt that this is the identical plaque which was purchased by Walton the day before his wedding, at a cost of two thousand five hundred and eighty pounds."

Jim looked at the jewel thoughtfully.

" You found it in your dressing-case ? Where was your dressing-case, Miss Coleman ? "

" On my bed," said the girl.

" Was it unlocked ? "

She shook her head.

" No ; I had left it open to put in a few things at the last moment. To-night I opened the case to find some brushes that I had packed, and in one of the pockets was this."

"There was no writing, no message?"

"None," she replied.

"When did you look into the case before—I mean, before you found the plaque?"

"Soon after Rex disappeared, I think," she said after a moment's thought. "I'm sure it was not there then."

Jimmy bit his lip in perplexity. The jewel must have been put into the bag between half-past ten and the hour at which the girl made her discovery. It might have been there before, and in her agitation passed unnoticed. It was curious, and something more than curious—it was uncanny. Obviously this was the bridegroom's present. Could Rex have put it there as some compensation——?

He dismissed the idea at once. Rex Walton would not imagine that a trumpery gift—it was trumpery in all the circumstances—could compensate the girl for the great wrong he had done her. A thought struck him.

"Did you miss anything from the bag?" he asked.

"No, I don't think so. I haven't made a very careful search; but there was nothing worth stealing, if that is what you mean. I thought that whoever had taken Rex might have had robbery as their motive, but of course that could not be."

Jimmy handed the case back to the girl.

"This is yours, of course. It was bought and intended for you, and it has really no place in the evidence which I am collecting."

"It will be in the newspapers, of course?" said Mr. Coleman with a frown. "This publicity is very painful to me, Captain Sepping, very painful indeed. I'm not afraid of the Conservative papers, which will treat the matter soberly and with no more details than are necessary. It is the ha'penny Press, that product of popular education, which I fear. For a man in my position, occupying, as I do, an important office of Government, the possibilities are extremely painful—extremely painful indeed." He waggled his large head irritably. He was apparently more concerned with the effect of Rex Walton's disappearance upon his official position, than with the grief and sorrow of his daughter.

The girl lingered a moment after her father had gone.

"You will telephone to me at any hour of the day or night if you get any news of Rex, won't you?" she begged, and Jim patted her hand sympathetically.

He went to bed that night with a feeling that there was something in Dicker's warning which deserved more attention than he had offered it at the time. Just as he was turning off the light, he heard the telephone bell ring, and presently his servant tapped at the door.

"Somebody on the 'phone, sir—they won't give a name."

Jimmy slipped a dressing-gown on and went into his study.

"That you, Captain Sepping?"

The voice was gruff and unknown to Jimmy.

"Yes. Who are you?"

"That doesn't matter," said the voice. "Get to Mr. Walton's house and clear the top right-hand drawer of his desk—hurry."

"But who are you?"

"This is urgent—clear it to-night. Get the letter in the blue envelope!"

There was a click as the receiver was hung up.

CHAPTER VII

JIMMY hurriedly dressed himself, and, finding a taxi, drove to Cadogan Square. There were lights showing in the windows, for Joan had not gone to bed, and she came with the footman to the door.

"Is there any news ?" she asked eagerly.

It began to dawn on Jim Sepping's mind that his interest in this strange case was not altogether professional, nor was its quickening due completely to his friendship for Rex. Joan Walton had grown to womanhood in a day, it seemed, and she held an appeal which startled and momentarily frightened him.

He took her into the drawing-room and there told her of the telephone message.

"No, it was not Rex's voice," he said, "and I haven't the slightest idea where they were telephoning from—I left that to my man to discover."

"It is extraordinary," she said, frowning in her perplexity. "I know nothing whatever of Rex's business. You had better come to his study."

The study was on the first floor, at the back of the house, a moderate sized apartment, made smaller by the bookshelves which covered its walls. In the centre of the room was a handsome modern desk. Jim, seating himself in the chair, tried the top drawer. It was locked, and resisted all his efforts to pull it out.

" Do you mind if I break this open ? " he asked, and for answer she rang the bell.

The weary-looking butler came at once, and Jim directed him to find the necessary tools to force the drawer. He came back with the very article that Jim could have desired—a large steel " claw " used for opening packing-cases. It took a long time to force the end of the tool between desk and drawer, and then he discovered he was up against something hard and unyielding.

" Excuse me, sir," said the butler, an interested spectator, " but that drawer is lined with steel. I've seen it open very often. Mr. Walton told me it was almost burglar-proof."

Jim ripped away the walnut casing and discovered the truth of the butler's words. The lining was of stout steel, but it was not burglar-proof, as he demonstrated after an hour's work.

At last he hammered a chisel edge between the drawer and the top, and as he did so he uttered an exclamation. From the little hole he had made, a volume of yellow smoke was curling forth.

" The drawer is on fire," he said, and this seemed to be the case.

There was room now for the claw of the case-opener to be inserted, and with a wrench he broke the edge of the lock and the drawer slid out.

" Get some water, quick," he said. For now dense smoke was rising from the open drawer.

" Open the window," said Jim, loath to use the water and damage the contents of the drawer.

He waited with a water-bottle in his hand, hesitating, and presently the smoke grew more attenuated, and he found himself looking into a mass of blackened ashes.

He drew the drawer out and laid it on the top of the desk. The bottom and the sides were hot, as though they had been subjected to a much greater heat than could possibly have been engendered during the short space of time between his puncturing the receptacle and his success.

" I think this fire must have been burning for some time," he said, " probably days."

" But how—— ? " began Joan.

Jimmy shook his head.

" I don't know exactly the chemical that was used, but I should imagine that it was put into the drawer, or into the blue envelope, at the same time as the letter, and the action has been going on ever since. Now I wonder which was the blue envelope?" he said ruefully, gazing upon the blackened debris that strewed the bottom of the drawer.

With the greatest care he lifted a portion of the burnt paper to the table and examined it under a reading glass. Ordinarily, when paper is burnt the writing is still visible, but in this case there was not so much as the letter of a word to be read. They looked at one another in silence, the man and the startled girl.

" What does it mean, Jimmy ? "

" It beats me," he confessed. " What was the object of sending me to the drawer, and how did they imagine I was going to open it ? Don't let this be touched," he said. " There may still be some sort of clue."

He made a careful examination of the rest of the writing-desk, but found nothing. The remainder of the drawers were opened, but contained no papers of the slightest importance.

"Did Rex keep a diary?"

"I don't think so," she said slowly. "No, I'm sure he didn't. He was always sarcastic about people who kept diaries."

Jim looked round the study. In one of the walls was set a big safe with a combination dial.

"Have you the combination?"

She shook her head.

"No," she replied. "I never interfered in any of Rex's affairs. The bank will probably have particulars of the combination. Rex was very methodical in things of that kind."

"I saw the manager of the South-Eastern Bank this morning," said Jimmy. "I ought to have asked him."

"The South-Eastern Bank wouldn't have it," said the girl to his surprise. "Rex only kept a very small account there. His big account is the London and Birmingham. Jimmy, I wanted you to see them to-morrow, anyway. Rex dropped a hint to me that somebody had threatened they would take away all his fortune if he married Dora. I've been thinking of this since, and I'm a little worried."

"You think they may have carried their threat into execution?"

She nodded.

Jim sat down in the desk chair, his hands lightly clasped, his frowning eyes fixed on the battered drawer, and then:

"If our unknown telephoner was anxious to save the contents of the drawer, I wonder he didn't telephone here."

She smiled.

"Probably because our line is out of order," she said. "It went wrong soon after dark to-night.

I was trying to get through to you to ask you whether any news of Rex had come."

"Out of order?" repeated Jimmy, and got up. "Which way does the telephone come into this room?"

She pointed to the window. In the corner of the sash he found the cleverly concealed connection that pierced the window frame, and apparently ran down or up the wall on the other side.

"Can you get me an electric torch?" he said. "I've come out singularly ill-equipped for any kind of investigation."

When a hand lamp had been secured, he went out of the house into the small yard at the back, and flashed the lamp up the window. He could see the telephone lead, a thin piece of lead piping that ran down the wall, turned at right angles under the coping of the yard wall, and apparently joined the main connecting wire in the little street that ran parallel with the backs of the houses.

There was no need for him to carry his scrutiny very far. Half-way across the wall he could see a gap of four inches in the wire, where it had been severed. He returned slowly to the study, and, sitting down, scribbled a note, which he sent off by the butler to the nearest police station.

"The telephone wire has been cut?" said the girl.

"Yes," replied Jimmy. "I don't know why, but I should imagine that some time between sunset and the time you called me—what hour was that?"

"About half-past ten."

"That was the hour our friend carried out his nefarious plan," nodded Jimmy.

"But why?"

"I can only guess," he said. "Evidently somebody had a very urgent reason for the drawer being unlocked, and somebody else had a more urgent reason why it should not be unlocked. My theory is that the unknown 'phoned you, probably telling you where the key of the desk was kept. We shall find it in course of time in this room. The other brilliant mind, anticipating some such move, cut you off, without allowing for the possibility that the unknown would telephone to me. Unless I'm wide of the mark, there is consternation in the enemy's camp at this moment, for I don't doubt that I have been watched."

"But what does it all mean, Jimmy?" she wailed. "I can't understand it. Jimmy, I'm almost frightened!"

"And for a moment I almost believed you," said Jimmy with a smile.

He looked at the charred remnants of Rex Walton's secret drawer, but he knew instinctively that nothing would be discovered from that mass which would in any way bring him nearer to a solution of the mystery of Rex Walton's disappearance.

The butler was back, and with him, to Joan's surprise, a uniformed policeman.

"I want to leave this constable in the house to-night," explained Jimmy. "To-morrow I will make other arrangements."

"Do you think there is any danger?" she asked.

"None," he said promptly; "but I want to be on the safe side."

His first act, on reaching his flat, was to get into touch with the emergency staff at the Telephone Department, and at six o'clock in the morning he had the satisfaction of being rung up from Cadogan Square, the connection having been restored.

There was no news of Rex Walton or of the missing valet when he made inquiries on rising. The two men had vanished, and the only clue as to Wells's disappearance was had from a local tradesman, who knew him and had seen him driving in a taxicab in the vicinity of the Marble Arch, about an hour after he had disappeared. That was the beginning and end of all the information that had accrued during the night.

Jimmy finished his frugal breakfast, and when the London and Birmingham Bank premises in Threadneedle Street were opened, he was the first caller, and was ushered into the office of the manager.

"I'm glad to see you, Mr. Sepping," said that official. "I presume you have had my letter."

"No, I haven't been to Scotland Yard this morning," said Jimmy. "What did you write about? But first, have you a box of Mr. Walton's in your strong-room?"

"We have," said the manager, "but it is empty. Mr. Walton cleared out everything of value a week before he disappeared. That is why I wrote to you."

"But he has still an account?" said Jimmy.

The manager shook his head, and Jimmy's jaw dropped.

"He has an account," the man hastened to explain, "but there is not more than a couple of hundred pounds to his credit. We have realised every security Mr. Walton held, and with the exception of this few hundreds he has drawn every penny that stood to his credit. In fact"—the manager spoke slowly and impressively—"during the week before his disappearance, Mr. Rex Walton took a million pounds from this bank!"

"In cash?" said Jimmy incredulously.

The manager nodded.

"In American currency. Fortunately for him, the money situation was good; otherwise, the throwing of his stock upon the market would have made something like a slump. I can give you particulars of where the stock has been sold——"

"That doesn't matter so much," said Jimmy quickly. "Can you tell me how he took the money from the bank?"

The manager rang a bell, and a clerk came in.

"Get me Mr. Walton's account," he said.

The books showed that a million had been taken away in three successive days. On the first day, 1,300,000 dollars in gold bonds of 5,000 dollar denomination had been taken; on the second day, a further sum of 1,800,000 dollars; on the third day, the remainder. The total amounted to 4,875,000 dollars.

"In addition," explained the manager, "Mr. Walton drew out four thousand pounds in English notes for his honeymoon trip."

"Did he give any explanation as to where he was going?"

"None," was the reply. "Mr. Walton is not the kind of man that one can question. He is rather autocratic and a little impatient of criticism. I told him what a tremendous risk he was running, in having so much currency in his possession, but he said very shortly that he had considered that matter already, and that he was not prepared to discuss the matter at all. In these circumstances, I had nothing else to do but to honour his cheques and carry out his instructions in regard to changing English for American currency."

"Have you kept the numbers of these gold bills?"

"No," said the manager, "we never keep American numbers. I drew the bills from the

Guarantee Bank of New York, who have an office in the City."

Jimmy Sepping thought a while, and then :

"I suppose that doesn't affect Miss Walton's account ; has she an account with you ?"

The manager nodded.

"No, of course, it doesn't affect her account, or her securities. I can tell you, Mr. Sepping however, that they are not very large. Mr. Walton's father left two-thirds to his son and a third to his daughter. That was what was worrying me ; because some months ago Miss Walton transferred a large block of stock to her brother, for the purpose of some transaction he was engaged in, and I can't help feeling that Mr. Walton has forgotten this fact, for the million is not wholly his ; nearly a third of it belongs to his sister."

Later, Jimmy was permitted to examine the steel box in which Rex Walton kept his private papers at the bank. With the exception of a few memoranda, the deed of a house in Suffolk, and a few other uninteresting things, there was nothing in the box of the slightest value.

"Isn't the money at Mr. Walton's house ?" asked the manager. "Have you opened his safe ?"

"I came here to get the combination," said Jim grimly, "and I'm going to have that safe opened !"

He returned to the girl and told her frankly the position. The fear of the possible loss of her money concerned her less than the account of Rex Walton's extraordinary actions.

"I can't understand Rex."

"I think I can," said Jimmy. "Rex was really troubled about this threat to ruin him, and thinking that Kupie had some sinister power which would enable him to get at the money in the bank, he was trapped into drawing it out. It's in the safe; of that I'm sure."

He knew all about this safe of Rex's, and had discussed it very fully when it was built into the solid wall of the house at Cadogan Place. It was large, both fire and burglar-proof, and its opening would only be a question of time, for the makers would know the code.

His first shock came after he had put through a call to Sheffield and had had a talk with the safemakers.

"There's no possible way of opening the safe," was the reply, "unless you have the code; and only Mr. Walton would know that, because he would set it himself."

"I want you to send your best men down to force it," said Jim, and there was a brief consultation at the other end. Presently the manufacturer spoke again.

"It will be necessary to remove the safe to Sheffield. The only man who could have done the job has unfortunately started opening safes on his own, and is now, I believe, in prison."

"Who is that?" asked Jimmy quickly.

"Knowles," was the reply. "I believe he is known to the police as 'Nippy' Knowles."

It was a name unknown to Jimmy.

CHAPTER VIII

"YES, I know Nippy," said Bill Dicker when he was consulted. " He used to be with the Sheffield Safe Corporation, one of their best workmen before he went on the crook. I never knew why he did it—he was underpaid, and maybe there was a woman in it somewhere. I should think that's more than likely, because women and their unreliability is his chief topic of conversation. He was up before an Old Bailey judge at the beginning of this year, and made a sensation by challenging all the women on the jury. You remember the newspaper story ? "

Jimmy nodded. He recalled very well the prisoner who had publicly stated that he would rather be hanged by men than acquitted by women. Jimmy secretly admired his courage, if he deplored his lack of gallantry.

" He was acquitted by the he-jury, anyway," said Dicker with his grim smile. " Perhaps they sympathised with his point of view, or maybe they were flattered—juries are queer. I'll get his address for you. He's the man to open your safe. What about Walton's lawyer ? He ought to be seen. Very likely he will be able to throw light on the disappearance."

" I saw him yesterday," said Jimmy. " He knows nothing. Walton made a will soon after he came out of the army, but that tells me nothing."

"The money is in the safe, of course," said Dicker after a pause. "There was no sign of the safe having been tampered with?"

"None. There is not so much as a scratch. I took particular notice of that."

Bill Dicker went out of the office and was gone for a few minutes. When he came back he had a slip of paper in his hand.

"Here is Nippy's address," he said, "165, Bolver Street, Lambeth. He has had two convictions and two miracles. In other words, he has escaped conviction on two occasions by acts of providence."

A taxicab took Jimmy to Bolver Street, Lambeth. The street consisted of two brick walls which were pierced at regular intervals with windows and doors all exactly alike. There was one window on the ground floor to the left of each door, and two windows on the first floor, and Jimmy knew that at the back of each house were forty square yards of back garden, given over to chickens and clothes-lines.

His knock was answered by a stout woman, bare-armed and suspicious. She had evidently come straight from the wash-tub, for her forearms glistened with lather.

"Mr. Knowles? I'll see," she said, shooting a suspicious glance at the detective.

She closed the door, and he heard her heavy feet ascending the creaking stairs. After a while she returned.

"Will you go up, sir? It's the door that faces you on the top landing."

"Come in," said a voice as Jimmy knocked, and he turned the handle and entered.

The room was comfortably furnished and spotlessly clean. The occupant looked up. He was a man below middle height and spare of frame. At the moment Jim entered he was in his shirt-sleeves, engaged in cooking sausages before a fire which overheated the room. He had a shock of auburn hair, a thin, sour-looking face, and on his long nose was a pair of shell-rimmed pince-nez.

"Come in and shut the door, and don't let Hector get out," he ordered peremptorily.

Jim looked round for Hector, and discovered it to mean a tiny mongrel pup, who was so industriously chewing the leg of one of the tables that he did not even cease his efforts to greet the stranger.

"Sit down, Mr. Sepping," said Nippy Knowles, and chuckled when he saw the look of surprise in Jim's face. "I spotted you coming down the street, and I happened to know you, inspector. If you are known by the police, the best thing you can do is to get to know the police. What do you want me for, anyway?"

"This is not a professional but a business visit," said Jim with a smile.

"That means that you don't want me, but you want information that will pinch somebody else," said Nippy, returning to his business of toasting sausages.

"In this case it doesn't," said Jim, seating himself and looking at the little man with amusement. "I want you to open a safe."

"Open a safe?" The man looked round with a start. "Whose safe is this?"

Jim explained at length, and, putting down his toasting-fork, Nippy Knowles listened intently.

"I saw the case in the paper this morning," he said, "and I was very sorry, because Mr. Walton was very good to me."

"Did you know him?" asked Jim in surprise, and Nippy nodded.

"Fixing his safe at Cadogan Place was the last bit of honest work I did," he said, unashamed. "He knew all about me because I told him—women!" he said contemptuously but inconsequently. "If I'd listened to him," he said with a note of bitterness which was in harmony with his expression, "*she'd* never have lured me on by promises, and she'd never have got me into trouble. Women!" he said again, and sneered at vacancy.

Jimmy was not in the mood to interest himself in the love affairs of a burglar. Who the mysterious "she" was, and exactly what tremendous act of treachery had driven Nippy into furtive and illicit methods of living, he did not ask. He had sufficient curiosity, however, to ask whether the man was married, and received a snorting and indignant "No."

"I've been in prison," said Nippy cheerfully, "but I'm not married. I haven't fallen so low. Now, Mr. Sepping," he asked more briskly, "if you don't mind me eating my breakfast while you're talking, I'd like to hear what you want me to do."

When Jim had finished:

"You'll have to find all the tools, Mr. Sepping, because I'm not going to risk my valuable kit on a job that will probably bring me in five—or maybe ten pounds," he said, watching the effect of his demands upon the detective's face.

"I'm sure Miss Walton will pay you handsomely," said Jim, and the man frowned.

"I keep forgetting it's Mr. Walton's safe. I don't want any money," he said sharply, "but you'll have to find the tools. I'm not going to give you a handle for me the next time I'm pinched."

Jim had kept his taxi waiting at the end of the street and drove the man back to Cadogan Place. They stopped on the way at various hardware merchants and other dealers in certain supplies. Half an hour after Nippy had arrived at Cadogan Place he was squatting, with a protective mask upon his face to keep off the terrific heat his blow-lamp was generating, and he was working scientifically upon the door of the safe.

It was a longer job than Jimmy had imagined, and he and the girl watched curiously as the safe-smasher operated.

" There are only two men in London who could do this job," said Nippy, pausing to wipe his streaming face and drink eagerly the water which had been supplied to him. " You needn't ask me for the other man's address. His permanent home is probably heaven, for he was respectable. And he was single," he added significantly, " and he's dead ! "

" You don't like women, Mr. Knowles ? " smiled the girl, and Nippy shook his head.

" They've been the ruin of me," he said. " At least, one has."

Joan thought it expedient not to press the little man for particulars, but to her he was less reticent.

" Women can take a man by the ear and make him do what he'd never do in a month of Sundays. She was a lady's maid, by all accounts, and as nice and as pretty a girl as you could ever wish to see, she was ! Highly mysterious, and her name was Julia."

He interrupted his narrative abruptly, and for another quarter of an hour was engaged in the task of cutting a large hole in the safe. Presently he put down the lamp, removed his goggles, and patted his streaming face vigorously with a handkerchief.

"I knew she was too good to be true," he said with relish, for he was on his favourite subject. "I'm not saying"—he went off at a tangent—"that I was not so scrupulously honest that I couldn't be tempted. But I must say that the idea of dropping off at Crook Corner had never occurred to me. Did I tell you her name was Julia? You think I am mad when I tell you she was lovely. People in my class haven't what you might term an educated eye, but I've always been a cut above a mechanic, and I know beauty when I see it, and she was lovely! Did I tell you?—yes, I think I did. She was parlourmaid in a house just outside Sheffield, a big, swagger house belonging to one of the steel kings. I'm not so sure whether he was a king or whether he was just a grand duke; but he had so much money that he could afford to look poor. I used to go courting, and one Sunday afternoon she took me into the house and showed me round. She was in a great state of mind because she'd lost the key of the safe. Her boss had sent her there to put away some books, and she'd closed the safe without noticing that the key was inside. She was almost crying. And her name was Julia." He sat back on his heels and grinned mirthlessly. "I opened that safe. There was no key there," he said simply. "It didn't seem funny to me, except that I was glad that the girl hadn't made the mistake she thought she had. It wasn't hard opening the safe; it was one of those advertised burglar-proofs, that a child could open with a hairpin. The next day Julia was missing. I heard about it by accident. In fact, I read the account of the robbery before I knew that Julia had anything to do with it—or rather, I had anything to do with it."

"Did you ever see her again?" asked Jim, unusually interested.

"Never saw her again," said Nippy solemnly as he went back to his work. "The mere fact that I'm not being held for murder is proof that I've never seen her again. She belonged to a gang, the Whoop-I-Addy Gang, well known in the Midlands. I wish they'd been well known to me."

He worked in silence for another quarter of an hour, then he put his gloved hand through the hole he had cut, tinkered a moment with the falls inside, and the door swung open.

"Thank you, Mr. Knowles," said Jim.

"It's a pleasure," said Mr. Knowles politely as he got up on his feet.

Jim pulled open the door and looked in. The safe was empty!

He could not believe his eyes, and drew out the two steel drawers at the back, though he knew it was impossible so large a sum of money could be concealed therein. The drawers also were empty. There was neither book nor paper of any kind—nothing but the bare walls and empty spaces.

He looked at the girl.

"There's nothing there," he said unnecessarily, for she had seen. "It's possible that it could have been stolen," said Jim, and Nippy interrupted him.

"It hasn't been stolen from this safe, I can tell you," he said. "There's nobody else who could have opened the door. It's quite possible to burn a hole in it, but that's only a quarter of the job. It's knowing the falls as I know 'em that makes it possible for me to open it. What did you expect to find, Mr. Sepping ? "

" A million pounds," said Jim slowly, and the man looked up at him sharply, thinking he was joking.

" Do you mean to say," he asked incredulously, " that a million pounds have been stolen ? "

It was the girl who answered.

" I think so, Mr. Knowles," she said quietly.

" But who'd do it ? " Nippy's forehead was wrinkled in thought. " There isn't a gang in town big enough to do that job, and I'll swear they couldn't open it unless they knew the combination. The Riley crowd are in jail, Ferdy Walters is in South America, that Kelly lot have given up safe-smashing and taken to petty larceny—no, there's nobody in town who could have burgled you—that I'll swear."

" The money has gone," said Jimmy simply.

Nippy put his head inside the door and scrutinised the light green walls with a professional eye.

" Something has been piled in here—up to there." He put his finger half-way up the wall. " See that dust ? You wouldn't, because you don't know safes. It's the finest dust in the world, finer than smoke, because it has to get in through crevices that the eye can't see. But it's worn off at the bottom."

Try as he did, Jimmy could not detect any difference between one part of the safe wall and the other. It looked absolutely speckless to him. But he did not question the judgment of the little burglar.

" Lost a million, eh ? " mused Nippy, sitting back again on his heels. " I've got a feeling that it will be a mighty long time before you'll ever see that money."

In spite of his disappointment, Jimmy laughed.

CHAPTER IX

DORA COLEMAN closed her book and put it down. Then, rising from the deep chair in which she had been sitting, alternately reading and dreaming, she went out into the hall. Parker was at that moment bolting the door, for Mr. Coleman had been called away into the country, and had reluctantly complied with the urgent summons.

With one foot on the stair, the girl turned and looked at the unconscious butler with grave eyes.

" There has been no telephone call ? "

" No, miss." Parker shook his head.

She took a few steps up the stairs, and then she stopped again.

" Parker, are you perfectly sure nothing else happened but what you said ? "

" About Mr. Walton, miss ? No, nothing else happened. I showed him up to the room. In fact, I wasn't going, only he didn't know where his room was. He looked inside, and then he asked me whether your room wasn't next door, and I told him yes. I asked him if he'd like any assistance to change, forgetting for a moment that he wasn't going to change till after the wedding. And he just laughed——"

" Laughed ? Then he was quite happy ? "

"Yes, miss. In fact, I've never seen Mr. Walton laugh before."

"Then you came downstairs, I suppose?"

"I came down to the dining-room, miss, and I never saw him again."

"Did he ask you any questions?"

The butler looked at her in surprise.

"Why, no, miss, nothing except where the room was."

She stood there, biting her lip thoughtfully.

"He didn't ask you whether there was another way out of the house?"

"No, miss."

"And you saw nobody else there? You didn't go inside?"

"No, miss; I just left him in the doorway."

She nodded.

"Thank you, Parker. Good night," she said, and went up to her room.

It was inexplicable to the girl. She sat down on her bed to think it all over again. And the more she thought, the more confused and wildly improbable her theories. Dora Coleman could face crises in a spirit of calmness which had puzzled Jim and even to her father, who thought he knew her better than any other man, was a source of wonder.

Rex loved her; of that she was sure. His love had grown in intensity in the days past. He would not, of caprice, hurt her. There was something . . . what was it? Something that had occurred between his leaving the wedding breakfast and his disappearance. Parker . . .?

She laughed as the thought came to her. Parker! That mild and inoffensive man!

At last she began slowly to undress, and within five minutes, in spite of her perplexity, in spite of the awful cloud which lay upon her horizon, she was asleep.

Her bedroom faced Portland Place, and Mr. Coleman's habitation was singular in that, before the second floor windows, was a narrow parapet-balcony which ran the width of the house. Before retiring she had opened the French windows and looked out. A clock was striking midnight, and the broad Place was far from deserted, for there was a dance at the Queen's Hall, and in the centre of the roadway a number of waiting cars were parked, whilst motor vehicles of every description passed and repassed up and down the wide thoroughfare throughout the night.

It was not the sound of motor wheels which woke her. The Place was singularly quiet, and not even the noise of belated footsteps broke the silence. She looked at the illuminated dial of the little gold clock that stood on a table by the bed. The hands pointed to a few minutes after three. Nor was it the rain that dripped in the street. The thunder, perhaps, she thought—she heard the roll and growl of it, and as she sat up in bed the opened window-panes flickered whitely for a second.

Pulling her wrap toward her, she put it about her shoulders and swung out of bed, intending to shut the window. As she looked out the lightning flickered again, and she stepped back with a little cry of fear. At the farther end of the balcony she had seen a dark shape crouching by the parapet. There was no mistaking the figure for anything else than what it was—a man in a shiny black coat.

Recovering herself instantly, she slammed the window and dropped the fastening with a hand that shook. In another second she was flying up the stairs to the servants' quarters.

Parker came to the door in his overcoat.

" Parker . . . there is a man on the balcony of my room ! " she gasped. " A burglar . . . ! "

The old butler went back to find a weapon, and preceded her down the stairs. As he switched on the light of her room, Dora saw that the second of the windows was opened, and remembered that, in her terror, she had not closed the glass doors.

" There's nobody on the balcony, miss," said Parker, coming in from the dark, his coat glistening with rain. " One of the big flower-pots is broken, but the wind may have blown it over."

At that moment his eyes fell upon a wet footprint on the polished floor near the second window.

" Look at that, miss," he said, pointing.

For a moment the significance of that wet footprint did not occur to her. When it did, she caught her breath.

" A man has been in here ! " she said, and, snatching a small table lamp from a bureau, she turned on the light.

There was no doubt about it now. Not one but five prints led across the apartment to the door, showing distinctly on the powder-blue carpet with which the centre was covered.

She touched one ; it was still wet.

" He must have come in when I went out of the room," she said in a whisper, and the old-fashioned revolver in the butler's hand trembled.

" Then he's in the house now, miss," he answered huskily.

" Call Bennett," she said to his relief, remembering the stalwart chauffeur who slept above the garage in the rear of the premises. His relief was not intensified by the knowledge that it was necessary to go down the dark stairs to admit the man after he had aroused him by telephone.

Parker crept fearfully down to the hall, his pistol wobbling alarmingly. A word to Bennett explained the situation, and the three—for Dora had hastily clad herself—began a search. The library door on the ground floor was wide open, but the room proved to be empty. From the library was a short passage-way that led to the servants' hall, and it was this way that the visitor had gone. They found rain drippings on the floor, and the distempered walls showed wet patches as though the stranger had brushed against them. There was a further trail through the servants' hall.

"He must have been here a few seconds ago," said the girl, and at that moment there came to their ears the crash of the front door as it closed.

The chauffeur leapt to the door of the servants' hall and flew along the main hall, flung open the street door and ran out. The street was empty except for a car which at that moment was pulling from the kerb.

Bennett sprinted toward the machine, but, as he did so, the car gathered speed and was soon a faint red spark in the distance. Bennett returned to the house.

"That was him all right, miss, I'm sure," he said. "He was just getting into the car as I came out."

"Did you take the number, Bennett?" asked the girl quietly.

"No, I didn't get near enough," he confessed, and scratched his head, puzzled. "That's a new idea, burglars in motor-cars! Where was he, miss?" And when she told him: "How did he get up to the top floor?"

He stepped out into the roadway and looked up at the façade of the house, and saw at once how simple a matter it was to an agile man.

"He got on to the porch from the railings, and then on to the lower balcony," he said. "By standing on the railings he could get to the second balcony."

"But why did he come into my room? Why didn't he try the first floor?" she asked, and remembered that the first floor windows were shuttered before the shaken Parker pointed out the fact.

"Shall I call a policeman, miss?" asked Parker when they returned to the hall, but Dora shook her head.

"I don't think it would be worth while, and I must ask father first. Mr. Coleman has already had sufficient publicity—so have I, for the matter of that," she said with a faint smile.

She made a tour of the drawing-room and her father's library. Apparently nothing had been touched in the latter rooms, and the intruder could only have had time to pass through. Obviously, he was there when Bennett came in, and was already making his stealthy way to the servants' hall. The few seconds' grace which allowed him to unbolt the front door had saved him. But had it? she wondered; and had reason for her doubt, for suddenly Parker uttered an exclamation.

Lying on a hall-table near the door was something that she had not seen before—a long-barrelled Browning pistol.

"He must have put that down whilst he was pulling back the bolts," said Bennett thoughtfully. "I'm rather glad I didn't reach him before he opened the door, miss."

The girl examined the weapon curiously.

"Is it loaded?" she asked.

Bennett took it from her hand and threw back the jacket.

"Yes; there's a cartridge in the chamber, and I should think the magazine's full by the weight of it."

He had jerked the cartridge from the chamber, and now he pulled out the magazine and examined the weapon under the light.

"I don't suppose he's left his name and address," he said facetiously, but the girl was not smiling.

"I think I will call up Mr. Sepping," she said. "Will you get Mr. Sepping's number, Parker?"

Jim was in bed and fast asleep when the telephone bell rang, and, thinking it was Joan, he jumped out and went to the instrument. It was Dora's clear voice that greeted him.

"Jimmy, I've had a burglar, but I don't want to tell the police. Could you possibly come round and advise me? I'll send Bennett with the car——"

"There's no need," said Jimmy. "There are always thousands of taxis about this neighbourhood. A burglary, did you say? Have you caught the gentleman?"

"No, I haven't. Father isn't here. Won't you come?"

"I'll be with you in ten minutes," said Jim optimistically.

It was nearer half an hour before he walked into the library, to find Dora sitting at her father's big desk, the Browning on the blotting-pad before her. In a few words she narrated the startling events of the night and he did not speak until she had finished.

"Burglars do not go around in motor-cars except in books," he said. "I fancy that Bennett must have been mistaken. It was probably some belated reveller from one of the houses along Portland Place. Lord Liverstoke was giving a dance last night; I remember because I was invited."

"Lord Liverstoke's house is on the other side of the Place," said the girl quietly.

Jimmy was examining the pistol under the light, and presently he saw something which Bennett had missed. It was a name faintly scratched upon the black steel barrel.

"Moses!" he said suddenly. "Do you see that?"

"What is it?" she asked.

"A name." He held the pistol for her to see it. Unmistakably scratched in scrawling characters was the word "Kupie."

CHAPTER X

THE sun had risen, flooding the streets with golden light, when Jim walked back to his Knightsbridge flat and let himself in. His servant was preparing coffee, and the fragrance of it came down the passage to meet the detective.

" I heard you go out, sir," said the man in explanation of his early rising. " Is there any news of Mr. Walton ? "

Jim shook his head.

" It is very curious to me," said the man as he set a steaming cup before his master.

" It is very curious to all of us," snapped Jim, who was not in the mood to discuss the baffling mystery of Rex Walton's disappearance at that hour of the morning, and with his servant, excellent fellow as Albert was.

And then, repenting of his brusque reply, he asked: " Why should it be particularly curious to you, Albert ? "

" Do you remember, sir, when the Major went away last year ? " To this old soldier, Rex Walton was " the Major " and nothing else. He had served in the same regiment in France, and although Rex had subsequently advanced beyond the grade, he remained " the Major " to the conservative Albert, who had known him in that rank.

" Yes, I remember," said Jim, looking up quickly. " You mean when he went on his vacation ? "

" Yes, sir. You used to talk about it, if you recall the matter, sir ? I remember you saying one day at breakfast that you wanted to get in touch with him, and you wished he had left an address. You said what a nuisance it was that people disappeared without letting anybody know where they had gone."

Jim nodded.

" I had forgotten that, Albert. Why, of course, he went away, didn't he, for three months in the summer ? How stupid of me to forget ! But that doesn't make his present disappearance any more curious, Albert."

" It does, and it doesn't," said Albert respectfully. " For it happens that I saw the Major during my holiday."

" The devil you did ! You never told me," said Jim in surprise.

" I didn't like to, sir," replied Albert. " I don't believe in talking about gentlemen, even to one's own gentleman. And all things considered, there was a reason why I didn't tell you. It was down in Gloucestershire, on the eighth of August ; I remember the date particularly well, because it was the day my brother got married, and, if you recollect, you allowed me to go away for three days."

Jim nodded.

" After we'd seen my brother off on his honeymoon—not that he's very happily married ; he often wishes he hadn't gone on a honeymoon at all, for his wife's a Tartar, but that's neither here nor there—I went for a stroll to call on some relations of mine who lived in the next village—Spurley. I was just going across the river bridge outside of

Spurley, when I saw a rough-looking man sitting on the bank below the bridge, and there was something about him which seemed familiar to me. He was wearing a very old suit, no collar—I could see his chest, and it was almost as burnt as his face. He had a rough sort of beard and longish hair, and I don't think he heard me because he didn't look up. I thought to myself, 'I know you, my friend,' but I couldn't place him until I was just near Spurley, and then I knew that it was Major Rex Walton!"

"Mr. Walton?" said Jimmy incredulously. "Are you sure?"

"Certain, sir," replied Albert with emphasis. "I was so sure that I went back to speak to him, thinking that he might be camping out. But when I got back, he'd disappeared. I walked into the next village, but nobody had seen him, and I'll swear he hadn't come through Spurley or passed me on the road. And there are no other roads about there, either."

"Perhaps he walked along the river bank?"

"There isn't a bank you could walk on," said Albert triumphantly. "No, he'd just gone. There's a little inn near by, and I went in and made inquiries there, but they said they hadn't seen anybody. Then I asked a man on a barge that was moored a little way up the stream, and he told me he'd seen the Major—of course he didn't know it was the Major—but he'd sort of gone away when this bargeman's eyes wasn't on him."

"Why didn't you tell me?" asked Jim.

"I didn't like to, sir. It was no business of mine, and, as I say, I don't like telling stories of that kind about other gentlemen. I might have been mistaken, though I'll swear I wasn't."

"What was he doing on the bank—just sitting watching the river?"

"No, sir; he had three stones, and he was tossing them up in the air and catching them, just the same as jugglers do."

Jim smothered an exclamation, for this was a favourite occupation of Rex Walton's leisure; he had acquired the habit at school, and he was absurdly proud of his dexterity. Of all people in the world, Albert would not know this, and in Jimmy's mind this little sidelight established the identity of Rex beyond any doubt. He made up his mind quickly.

"Albert, go down to Spurley to-morrow and make a very thorough search of that country. It is possible that the Major has a cottage there somewhere, the sort of place he could retire to for quiet."

"That's an idea that struck me, sir, lying in bed last night," said Albert, but Jimmy interrupted the coming recital.

"You must do your work very thoroughly, Albert. There mustn't be a farmhouse or a cottage where a man may lodge that you do not inquire about. Take Spurley as your centre, and work round thoroughly. You can make all the inquiries you want, and spend money to secure information. If you get the slightest hint of Major Walton being in the neighbourhood, send me a telegram. Or, better still, get to the nearest telephone and ring me up. There's a train leaves for Gloucester at eight o'clock—catch it!"

At the earliest opportunity that morning he saw Joan and told her what he had learnt. But here she could give him no information.

"I haven't the slightest idea where Rex went for his holiday last year. He likes these unusual vacations. I remember one summer he went on a walking tour through Russia, and even father did not know where he was."

"He has no associations in Gloucestershire?"

She shook her head.

"None, so far as I know," she said, and a frown wrinkled her pretty forehead. "When Rex came back, I remember he was very brown, but he was eminently respectable-looking," she said.

He did not tell her of the burglary at Portland Place, for Dora had begged him to keep the matter a secret until she learnt her father's wishes upon the subject. What those were, he was to learn, for Mr. Coleman, returning that morning, came to his office to see him.

"I wish I had been at home," he snorted, implying that in that event the midnight intruder would have had a very uncomfortable time. "I would have settled with the rascal! But you quite understand, my dear Sepping, that I prefer this attempted burglary, as I am sure it was, should not be made public. Nothing has been lost, nothing is missing. I have made a very careful examination of my little treasures, such as they are. But already my colleagues at the Treasury are looking askance at me. We do not like publicity at the Treasury. And I agree with their attitude. I will go so far as to say that it is not in the best interests of the service that the identity or the home life of its principal officers should be common property. For example, I would never dream of asking my own head clerk to my house. The public official, my dear Sepping, should be enveloped in an atmosphere of—er—mystery. He should be so unapproachable that, as it were——"

"In fact," interrupted Jim with a smile, "he should be godlike."

"Godlike with a small 'g,'" agreed Mr. Coleman with all gravity, and rubbed his spectacles vigorously. "Anonymity is the basis of public efficiency," he continued; "and I deplore the tendency of the age, which is to strip the veil which hides the private and decent life of great officials, and give his life to the world in snippets or so-called pen-pictures—a practice which, I understand, was inaugurated many years ago by a Radical newspaper. That was natural. What is inexplicable is that the more staid and sober organs of public opinion should have followed this pernicious example. In my view, no public official's life story should be printed except in the form of an obituary, and even then the account should be restrained and dignified."

He left Jimmy with the impression that, if his obituary did not fulfil these conditions, he was liable to rise from his grave to confront the offender.

"No news of Walton, of course?" said Mr. Coleman, turning as he was stalking towards the door.

"Why 'of course,' Mr. Coleman? Don't you expect to hear?"

Mr. Coleman shook his head vigorously.

"No, sir, I do not expect to hear," he said solemnly. "I am perfectly satisfied in my mind that Mr. Walton has gone mad, and that one of these days we shall hear of his violent death."

He uttered this startling prophecy in the same even tone as he would have employed were he discussing the quality of a new supply of red tape.

"Good Lord!" said Jim, gaping at him. "You don't really mean that you think that, Mr. Coleman?"

"Don't you?" countered the Civil Servant.

"I certainly do not," said Jim. "Rex was as sane as you or I, and he would no more have thought of laying hands on himself than I. If he is found dead, it will be because he's murdered."

"I hope so," said Mr. Coleman ambiguously. "I'm sure I hope so. It is a terrible business. My poor daughter goes about like one in a dream."

He took his departure with that stateliness of gesture and movement which was so much part of him. So deliberate was he that Jimmy overtook him on the Embankment, and was embarrassed, for nothing is quite so disconcerting as to meet somebody to whom you have said good-bye, a few minutes after the farewells have been said.

Nothing embarrassed Mr. Coleman, however, as he fell in by the detective's side (unhappily Jimmy was going the same way) and took up the thread of his discourse where he had laid it down.

"I shall purchase a revolver, preferably of European make," he said firmly. "I have reason to suspect the quality of American manufactures since I read in one of their magazines an exposure of the Chicago meat—er—packers. Perhaps it was in a book. I remember reading it somewhere. I do not approve of firearms—they are particularly dangerous. But a five-or six-chambered revolver——"

"Six," said Jimmy. "A Browning is better."

"Thank you—I prefer a revolver. I should imagine that even the lightest form of machine-gun would—er—be cumbersome."

Jimmy explained patiently the function and character of an automatic pistol, but Mr. Coleman was not converted.

Opposite the Treasury Mr. Coleman stopped dead.

" We will part here," he said. " It would not be in the interests of the public service that I should be seen in the company of a—er—police officer. The doorkeeper, who is, I fear, a gossipy fellow, might draw the wildest conclusions."

So, secretly amused, Jimmy watched the great man cross the road and pass in through the worn portals of his department.

There was something inhuman about Mr. Coleman. The loss of a wealthy son-in-law, the tragedy which threatened to darken his daughter's life, the terrific possibilities which lay behind Rex Walton's disappearance—none of these tremendous things was as important to him as his standing with the fusty Olympians of the Treasury.

Jimmy continued his walk alone, glad to be alone. So far, the newspapers had not enlarged unduly upon Rex Walton's disappearance. Rich as he was, he did not fill the public eye and was neither actor nor politician. Rex Walton's " insignificance," from a news point of view, was all to the good, though he realised that the secret could not be kept much longer. He had satisfied the press that Walton's absence was due to his probable loss of memory, and the press comments in consequence had been brief. Later, to pressmen who came for further news he offered Walton's curious habit of taking holidays in secret places as the reason for the advertisements that had been inserted.

At the corner of Trafalgar Square and Whitehall Jimmy's attention was attracted by a newspaper placard:

" THE MISSING MILLION "

He swore softly under his breath, for every care had been taken to prevent the leakage of this sensational happening. He bought a copy of the paper, and, standing in the street, unfolded it and read. There was no doubt as to the leakage. Splashed across three columns was the scare headline:

"MILLIONAIRE DISAPPEARS ON HIS WEDDING DAY AND TAKES HIS FORTUNE WITH HIM."

He read carefully the two closely-set columns which followed. They dealt with remarkable accuracy with Rex and his romantic wedding, and told of the events which had followed.

> "Fortunately there was present, at the breakfast from which Mr. Walton made so strange a disappearance, Detective-Inspector Sepping, of Scotland Yard, who was a personal friend of this eccentric millionaire. He immediately took charge of the case and instituted inquiries, which, however, brought no satisfactory solution to this remarkable mystery. Yesterday morning it was decided to make a search of Mr. Walton's papers, and to this end his safe, which was believed to contain over £900,000, drawn a few days previously from the bank, was opened, only to discover that the money, if it had ever been there, was gone."

Jimmy read carefully, and the more he read the more troubled he became, for whoever supplied the newspaper with these facts was as well informed on the subject as he himself. It could not be Joan.

He stepped into the nearest telephone booth and 'phoned to the girl.

"Have you seen the early evening newspapers?" he asked.

"Yes, I have just had a copy brought in," said Joan's anxious voice. "Jimmy, honestly I didn't give the reporter any information. He knew everything before he came. When he asked me to confirm the news, I couldn't do anything else, could I?"

"You've seen the reporter, have you?" said Jimmy in surprise. "At what time?"

"He came at seven o'clock," said the girl, "and he had all the facts as they appear in the newspaper I told him to see you, but he was very insistent upon my confirming the news. He had all the details written out on paper before he came."

"Extraordinary," said Jimmy.

"I thought——" She hesitated.

"You thought I'd given it to the press?" he finished her sentence for her. "That is the last thing I should dream of doing," he said grimly.

Jumping into a taxi, he drove down to the office of the *Evening Megaphone*, and was immediately admitted to the managing editor's sanctum.

"The news came in late last night," said that gentleman. "It was delivered by hand; I think I can show you the original copy."

He touched a bell and gave instructions to his secretary, and in a few minutes Jimmy was reading the account as it had been written by the unknown informant. To Jimmy, however, the document was as easily identifiable as though it bore the address and signature of the writer.

"Kupie," he said tersely. "I know that hand and that paper."

"The facts are, of course, as stated?" said the editor, and Jimmy nodded.

"The early morning editor got the copy, and sent a reporter out to confirm it," the journalist went on. "Of course, we shouldn't have dreamed of printing a line if Miss Walton hadn't endorsed the news. Kupie, eh?" He took the paper from the detective's hand and looked at it curiously. "I thought Kupie was dead; we haven't heard a Kupie story for months—unless——"

"Unless what?" asked Jim, seeing the editor surveying him keenly.

"Well, I've been wondering about that suicide at Scotland Yard—poor Miller . . . I knew him slightly. Was that Kupie's work?"

The tone in which the question was asked had a certain significance.

"Why do you think so?" demanded Jim.

"I don't know . . . only there were rumours in Fleet Street about that time, and they all centred on Miller. Ugly rumours—the sort of thing that reporters discuss among themselves, and which are generally accurate."

Jimmy was not prepared to discuss that matter, and left, carrying away with him Kupie's *communiqué*. Why had this mysterious individual notified the press? What was to be gained, what end was to be served? Kupie was not the type of criminal who bothered his head about the etceteras. He did nothing which had not a special and peculiar value to himself. If Kupie was responsible for Walton's disappearance and the stealing of his fortune, he had everything to gain by hushing the matter up, and everything to lose by giving it the publicity for which he was undoubtedly responsible.

Bill Dicker, who was a tower of strength in such moments of crisis as these, had his own views.

"He is pinning the robbery to the disappearance," he said emphatically, "and his object is to prove the responsibility of Rex Walton for the taking of his million. Kupie, I'm sure, isn't responsible for both happenings. If he is the man who spirited away Rex Walton, he did not spirit away the money. If he *is* responsible for taking the money, the disappearance of Walton was as much of a shock to him as it was to us."

He read the paper for the second time and nodded.

"That is it," he said. "Do you notice how, whenever Walton is mentioned, the money is also referred to, and when this account tells of the money having gone, it goes straight on to connect one mystery with the other? What do you make of the writing, Sepping?"

Jimmy had already decided in his mind the character of the writer.

"Middle-aged," he said. "There is a shakiness in the writing that appears in every letter. The calligraphy is that of a person who is not accustomed to do much writing——"

"And yet the style is excellent," said Dicker. "The construction of this anonymous letter is, at any rate, up to Kupie's usual standard."

Jim sat for an hour in his office, puzzling over the extraordinary developments of the past few days, and he had given up in despair when his clerk brought him a letter.

"Delivered by hand, sir," he said.

It was from Dora.

Dear Jimmy (it ran) *I wonder if I could see you this evening? Father will be out, and I am most anxious to have a quiet and uninterrupted* *talk about Rex. So, if your professional duties will allow you, could you spare an hour?*

He put down the letter with a sigh. Poor Dora! Was it possible that she, and not Rex Walton, was the object of Kupie's malice? And then he remembered yet another girl, one who had been hounded to her death by this unknown miscreant. He was so musing when Bill Dicker came in, puffing furiously at his pipe, and closed the door behind him.

"I am raiding 973, Jemons Street to-night," he said. "They've been running a faro game there, and I've got an idea that there is a dope parlour attached. Casey, the nominal proprietor, is, I believe, a figurehead."

Jimmy looked up in surprise.

"I've never heard of this establishment," he said. "It isn't on our list."

Bill Dicker shook his head.

"They've had the divisional police straightened; at least, I suspect that is the explanation. We got the news from a reliable 'nose,' and we'll put finish to it to-night. I wondered if you'd care to take on the case?"

Jimmy shook his head.

"I think I've enough to occupy my activities for a month or so," he said seriously, and Bill Dicker agreed.

"There are too many of these gaming houses wide open," he said, "and the Divisional C.I.D. is responsible. At any rate, there's somebody either at head-quarters or at division tipping off these people when a raid is expected, with the result that we haven't had a haul for two months." He sat down on the edge of the table, pulling at his pipe, a frown on his big face. "And behind the gaming house is Kupie," he said unexpectedly.

"Why do you say that?" asked the startled Jim.

"Go back over all Kupie's crimes," said Bill Dicker, "and you'll find there's a line that leads every one, except the case of Rex Walton, to a gaming house. I've tracked a dozen that way. Either the victim has been to a gaming house, or the person who has wittingly or unwittingly supplied the necessary information to Kupie has been a gambler and an associate of people who run these establishments." He picked up from the desk the envelope which had contained Dora's letter, and looked at it idly. "The man who brought this isn't a professional burglar," he said, pointing to a corner where there was a faint impression of a thumb-mark.

Jim chuckled.

"I've never been crazy about the finger-print system," he said. "It hasn't been proved. How can it be proved until you have the finger-prints of every person in the country? What you have got are the prints of a few thousand criminals; and because no two of eighty thousand are alike, you say there can be no two of forty millions alike, which doesn't seem to me to be logical. I admit it is useful for keeping tag of known law-breakers, but to my mind it is not conclusive. The chances are that this"—he tapped the envelope—"which is the finger-print of a perfectly innocent man, has a duplicate at Scotland Yard."

"It is a million to one it hasn't," said Bill Dicker complacently. "It seems like any other old finger-print to you, but to the expert eye there's a world of difference." He got down from the table and, walking to the door, called Jim's clerk from the outer office. " Take this down to Inspector Baring and ask him if he can recognise it."

" Of course he won't," said Jim scornfully. " After all, this particular print is one of the forty million."

There was nothing remarkable in Bill Dicker's action. Dactyology was an obsession with him. He was an enthusiast, as Jimmy told him once, to the point of lunacy. A crime without a finger-print in it was a dull affair to Bill Dicker, and it was his habit to seek every opportunity of confounding his sceptical assistant. Once he had had the finger-prints taken of five elementary schools; once, after a great deal of persuasion, he had succeeded in inducing the chairman of a great manufacturing plant to send in finger-prints of the five thousand men in his employ, in order to demonstrate that, even amongst the non-criminal classes, there could be no similarity.

He was talking about the projected raid when the clerk came back, carrying in his hand a card, at the sight of which Bill Dicker raised his eyebrows.

" A record ? " he said incredulously.

" Yes, sir," said the clerk. " Mr. Baring says that it is the print of Joseph Felman."

Dicker almost snatched the card from the man's hand, and Jim, looking at it, saw his eyebrows go up and his mouth open.

" Felman has been convicted three times of blackmail," he said slowly. " Age fifty-six ; three terms of penal servitude, two minor convictions—and listen to this, Jimmy :

" ' Felman usually poses as a domestic servant, either footman or butler, and in this rôle gains access to the houses of titled people, where he secures material for blackmail.' "

Jim picked up the telephone and called the hall sergeant.

"Sergeant, there was a letter delivered to me half an hour ago. It came by hand. Who brought it?"

"An elderly man, sir," was the reply. "He said he was Mr. Coleman's butler. His name was Parker."

CHAPTER XI

THE two men looked at one another in silence. Parker! The man who had shown Rex Walton to his room. The staid and sober servant of the Colemans, and the last man in the world whom Jimmy Sepping would have suspected.

The same thought was passing through the mind of Dicker.

"Go slow here, Jimmy," he said. "This man may lead you to the big thing."

"But it's incredible!" said Jimmy.

"There was nothing more incredible than the disappearance of Rex Walton," replied Dicker quietly. "I repeat, go slow! If you scare this bird, you may never have another chance of getting next to Kupie."

"Do you think he is Kupie?"

"He knows Kupie; of that I'm certain," said Dicker. "And, of course, he's in the very job that gives him the biggest opportunity. Coleman is in the Treasury, and probably has officials to dine with him; and who would suspect the hoary-headed butler? And Government officials talk, Jimmy. It's a popular delusion that they're as close as an oyster and as discreet as Lucretia Borgia; but I've heard 'em talk. I repeat for the third time, go slow. If you interview Coleman——"

Jimmy shook his head.

"I shouldn't ask Coleman, because he's the type of pompous idiot who couldn't stop himself showing that he knew Parker's secret. It will take a week of tactful inquiry to discover how he came to engage this man. And I don't think I dare shadow Parker either," he said thoughtfully. "There isn't a move in the game that Parker will not understand."

Nevertheless, there were certain preliminary inquiries which could be made without alarming his prospective prisoner. That afternoon a middle-aged woman called at the servants' door of Mr. Coleman's residence, and she had for sale a number of cheap and tempting trinkets. To secure admission to the kitchen was a fairly simple matter. And when she revealed that, in addition to being a pedlar, she was a fortune-teller, her stay was a prolonged one, until Parker, coming unexpectedly into the kitchen, found her reading the palm of a giggling housemaid, and unceremoniously turned her out.

The "pedlar" reported to Jimmy at his flat. She was a woman detective who had been in the service of the State for many years.

"Parker has been with the Colemans two or three years," she said. "He is off duty on Thursday and Saturday evenings, and he has always plenty of money. The upper housemaid thinks he is a gambler, because she found him practising with a pack of cards in his room one day. He was apparently arranging cards in order."

"Has he any relations?" asked Jimmy.

"Not that I could find out," said the woman detective. "They know little about him, because he always keeps his room locked and sweeps and dusts it himself."

When the woman was gone Jimmy changed his clothes and went round to Portland Place to keep his appointment with Dora. He had sent her a note that afternoon to say that he was coming.

The visit to Portland Place had an additional importance for him now. He wished to see Parker at closer quarters, and more particularly he was anxious to ask Dora about the man. He relied entirely upon the girl's discretion, and in this respect he had no misgivings, for he recognised the strength of her character and her immense superiority to her male relative.

At half-past seven he rang the bell of Mr. Coleman's house, and Parker admitted him. Jim regarded the man now with a new interest. At any rate, he was the age of the blackmailing Felman, a grey, spare man, with a large nose and a pair of thin, straight lips. He took Jim's coat and hat from him and showed him into the drawing-room.

" Miss Coleman is out, sir," he said.

" Out ? " repeated Jimmy, surprised. " But I have an appointment with her."

" Indeed, sir ? " The man's tone was even and deferential. " I rather think, from something she said, that she was coming back, because she told me that if anybody called I was to keep them until her return. Have you seen the evening newspaper, sir ? "

" Yes, I've seen it, Parker," said Jimmy carelessly.

" It is very terrible that all this has got into the paper about Mr. Walton," said Parker, shaking his head. " Mr. Coleman is very angry indeed.

Naturally, a gentleman of his position doesn't want all the world to know his trouble."

"Naturally," said Jimmy dryly. "What is your theory, Parker?"

"About Mr. Walton, sir? It is very remarkable. I have no theories at all."

Jim shot a swift glance at the man. His face was a mask, set and inscrutable.

"Do you think he went away of his own free will?" he asked.

Parker nodded.

"It is impossible that he could have gone any other way, sir. If there had been any assault upon Mr. Walton I should have heard it, or at any rate the servants in the hall below would have heard it, and they heard nothing."

"Probably Kupie heard him," said Jimmy, hi eyes on the man's face.

"You mean the blackmailing man?" said the imperturbable Parker. "That seems remarkable too, sir. It is almost like a story out of a book. Have you dined, sir?"

Jimmy nodded, and with a deferential bend of his head the butler went out.

Jimmy strolled about the drawing-room. Dora must have spent the afternoon here. An open book, face downwards, lay upon a table near the settee; the impress of her head showed on a cushion, and on the mantelpiece was an invitation to a Foreign Office reception, and a small envelope which, Jimmy guessed, contained theatre tickets.

The door opened as he was standing with his back to the fireplace, his busy mind revolving the case against Parker, and that individual came in with a silver tray, which he set on a table.

"I've taken the liberty of bringing you some coffee, sir," he said. And then: "Do you take sugar and cream, sir?"

"Black," said Jimmy, and the butler poured the cup full.

Whatever he was, he was an excellent butler. He moved with that deliberation which is peculiar in a well-trained servant; he did nothing hurriedly and nothing wrong.

Jimmy took the coffee from his hand, watching him absently.

"What do you do with yourself, Parker, when you're not buttling?" he asked facetiously, and for a second Parker unbent. A faint smile lit up his sombre face.

"There is so little that a man of my age can do, sir," he said. "I go to a concert occasionally; I am very fond of orchestral music. Or, in the summer, I walk in the park whenever I have an hour to myself."

Jimmy sipped his coffee, listening.

"I enjoy a good book—preferably a book of travel," Parker went on reminiscently. "The cinema has little attraction for me; I find the pictures make my eyes tired; but occasionally Mr. Coleman, in his kindness, gives me a ticket for one of the theatres—I am partial to light comedy."

He took the cup from Jimmy's hand and put it down on the tray.

"At fifty-seven one is not inclined for the more violent form of play," he said; "although I like very occasionally to see a Shakespearean tragedy . . ."

Jimmy listened without hearing; and then he realised, in an inert fashion, that he was going to sleep, and tried to open his eyes again. The effort was so painful that his lids dropped. It was ridiculous, of course, to go to sleep in Dora's drawing-room, but Parker's voice was very soothing. And then, before he could grasp what was happening, his head fell back upon the padded end of the chesterfield and he was fast asleep.

CHAPTER XII

THE first conscious sensation that Jimmy Sepping had was of a staccato knocking. He dreamt that he was at Scotland Yard, examining finger-prints with Dicker, and one of the lines on a print could not be kept into place, until Dicker produced a tack and an ebony ruler and began solemnly to hammer the line into place. Then he heard voices calling :

" Who's in there ? "

His head was aching, his mouth was hot and parched. With a supreme effort of will he sat up, groaning, and by the unshaded light hung from the centre of the ceiling he saw that he was in a small room and had been lying on an iron bedstead. Where was he ? He buried his face in his hands and strove to think, and all the time the hammering and shouting was going on outside the door.

" Who is there ? " said a voice again.

Where was he ? The window was shuttered. It might be broad daylight or the middle of the night. He staggered to the door and tried to open it, but it was locked.

" Open this door ! " said a voice outside, and with a start he recognised Bill Dicker.

" There is no key," he said. " Is that you, Dicker ? "

There was a pause.

"Who's there?"

"Sepping," said Jimmy. "Break the lock."

Presently, with a crash, the door flew open. Bill Dicker was standing on the landing, and behind him were two men whom Jimmy recognised as Scotland Yard officers. And in Dicker's eyes was a look that Jimmy had never seen before.

"What are you doing here, Sepping?" he asked.

"I can't tell you. Where am I, anyway?"

"You're in Casey's gaming house in Jemons Street."

With a gasp Jimmy sat down on the bed.

"Either I'm mad or you're mad," he said.

"Where are your clothes?" asked Dicker, and then Jimmy realised that he was undressed, save for his shirt and trousers. His coat was thrown over the back of a chair, his boots were raked out from beneath the bed.

"Bring up Casey," said Dicker shortly, and one of the detectives went away, to return with a broad-faced man in evening dress.

"What is this gentleman doing here?" asked Dicker sternly.

"What's he doing here? He lives here," said Casey in a loud voice. "I'm sorry to give you away, Captain, but I'm in bad myself."

"What do you mean by 'lives here'?" asked Dicker quietly. "Do you suggest that Mr. Sepping knew of this gaming house?"

"Do I?" sneered the other. "I should say I did! Why, I've been paying 'black'* for years, and he's had his cut from the profits—I had to straighten somebody, didn't I?"

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* Blackmail, in the argot.

Without a word of protest, Jimmy staggered to the washstand and dipped his head in a basin of cold water. The shock had the effect of easing the throbbing pain in his head, and enabled him to think a little more clearly.

"Say that again," he said.

"What's the good, Captain?" wheedled Casey. "They've got us good. I'll find six months, and you'll lose your coat! I've paid this man a hundred a week to tip me off when there was any raid coming," he said, addressing Bill Dicker. "He sleeps here twice a week, and I've got half a dozen witnesses to prove it."

"Take him downstairs," said Dicker quietly, and, coming into the room, closed the door behind him. "Now, what's the story, Jimmy?" he said kindly.

Jimmy shook his throbbing head.

"I'd like to be able to tell you," he said. "The only story I know is that I took coffee with Mr. Parker to-night, or last night, or the night before last—heaven knows when—and I woke up to find myself here."

Briefly he told what had happened at Portland Place.

"I believe you, Jimmy," said Dicker when he finished. "The thing was a plot to discredit you. But there's a lot more behind it than appears. Put your clothes on, and we'll go round to Portland Place and have a talk with Mr. Parker. What time did you take the dope?—for dope you had undoubtedly."

Jimmy thought.

"It must have been nearly eight o'clock," he said.

"It's now half-past two," said the inspector, looking at his watch. "Jimmy, Kupie wanted you out of this case, and planned the most effective way, which was to discredit you. And, of course, Parker is Kupie."

When they reached Portland Place the house was in darkness, and, though they rang the bell of the house half a dozen times, there was no reply.

"The hotel is open," said Jimmy suddenly. "We will telephone. He is bound to hear that."

They went over to the hotel, and after a little time Mr. Coleman's voice answered them. Without stating the object of the call the two men crossed again, to find the door open and Coleman, in his dressing-gown, in the hall.

"Come in, come in," he said irritably. "What is it you want? Couldn't you wait till the morning, my dear Sepping? It is really too bad to call me out of my bed at this time of the night, after——" He stopped suddenly. "Has anything happened to Parker?" he said quickly.

"Why do you ask?" said Dicker.

"He was out when I came back, and he hasn't returned. I waited up until one o'clock! A nice state of affairs! Of course, I shall discharge him in the morning," snapped Mr. Coleman. "I never give an unreliable servant two chances My experience is that that class of person takes advantage of any kindness you may show—and I thought I could trust Parker. He came to me with excellent credentials, and he has never before shown the slightest disposition toward indiscipline. It's the restless tendency of the age, fostered and engendered by Radical——"

"Nothing has happened to Parker—yet," said Bill Dicker. "Can I see his room?"

Mr. Coleman frowned.

"Why should you see Parker's room?" he asked with acerbity. "He is not there—I have already looked."

"Mr. Coleman," said Jimmy quietly, "I have reason to believe that Parker is an ex-convict and blackmailer named Felman."

Coleman's jaw dropped.

"An ex-convict?" he said, as though he could not believe his ears. "He came to me with the most excellent character from Lord Lagenhame, and he's been perfectly honest all the time he's been with me; I've not missed——"

"Will you please let us see the room?" said Dicker brusquely, and the Treasury official led them up to the top floor. They were passing the second floor when a voice asked:

"Is anything wrong, father?"

"Nothing wrong at all," said Jimmy, forestalling the indignant Mr. Coleman.

"Oh, is that you, Jimmy? I am so glad. Has anything happened to Parker?"

"No, nothing," said Jimmy, and he heard the door close softly.

Parker occupied a room at the top of the building. It was a small, comfortably furnished apartment, the bed of which had not been slept in. His property was scanty, and the men found nothing that gave the slightest clue either to his character or to his present whereabouts. When they got downstairs to the drawing-room again, Mr. Coleman told all he knew.

"Dora and I went to a theatre. The poor girl needs some kind of recreation, and although she did not wish to go, I persuaded her. In fact, I commanded her. I think that parents have certain rights which are too frequently flouted in this age."

Jimmy cut short his dissertation upon the duty of children to their begetters.

" I'd like to see Dora. Would you ask her to come down ? "

His request had been anticipated, for, as Mr. Coleman moved toward the door, it opened to admit the girl. It was the first time Bill Dicker had ever seen her, and Jimmy heard the quick intake of his breath as he gazed upon her loveliness. She wore a long, black chiffon velvet wrap, which threw into relief the purity of her skin and the golden splendour of her hair.

" Is there anything wrong ? " she asked again, addressing Jimmy, and it was Mr. Coleman who answered.

" Parker is a scoundrel ! " he spluttered. " He's a blackmailer, according to these gentlemen. He's a wolf in sheep's clothing, my dear ! The man has deceived me. Excuse me," he apologised, and dashed from the room.

Jimmy was in the midst of his explanation when he came back, his face beaming.

" The silver has *not* gone ! " he said. " Nor my cuff-links—have you missed anything, my dear ? "

She silenced him with a gesture.

" Go on, Jimmy. You had a letter from me, asking you to call ? I never wrote such a letter."

" You never wrote ? But I'll swear it was in your handwriting. In fact, I think I've got it here." He searched his pockets and took out the note and handed it to her. After a glance, she nodded. " Yes, I wrote that, but I wrote it a week ago ; in fact, I wrote it the day before Rex disappeared. I wanted to talk to you about him, but at the last moment I changed my mind. I thought

I'd torn the note up, but evidently I threw it into the waste-paper basket."

Jim took the letter from her hand. For the first time he noticed there was no date.

" Probably I had the envelope already addressed," said Dora. " I invariably address an envelope before I write the letter. And Parker must have found it and kept it—poor Jimmy ! "

Her voice was soft, the eyes that met his were humid with sympathy.

" And yet I can't understand it," said the perplexed Dicker. " Parker must have known that I should accept Mr. Sepping's story, and that he himself would be in bad. It was almost like the last spiteful act of a man who knew the jig was up. But as against that, how did he know the jig was up ? By the way, have you a specimen of his handwriting ? "

Mr. Coleman knit his brows.

" I can't think," he said. " There was no occasion for Parker to write. Were there no letters in his room ? "

Dicker shook his head.

" Nothing at all."

" I think I have a note of Parker's," said the girl suddenly.

She went to a little secretaire in the corner of the drawing-room and opened it, taking out a book.

" Here is some of his writing. It is a list he gave me of the repairs that had to be done. He kept this book for breakages. Father is rather particular about broken plates and things."

" And rightly, my dear," said Mr. Coleman, closing his eyes. " Very rightly. You cannot teach servants to be careful unless you charge them for their breakages ! The present type of maid one nas is abominably careless, and if you did not keep some check upon them it would cost you a fortune, sir, it would cost you a fortune!"

One glance at the book told Jimmy all he wanted to know. He handed it without a word to Dicker. and the chief grunted his satisfaction.

"Here's our Kupie all right," he said. "There's no doubt about that, Sepping."

"None at all," replied Jimmy. "It is exactly the same handwriting as we've seen in all the Kupie warnings. There will be sad hearts in the toy-shop within the next twenty-four hours, unless I am greatly mistaken!"

They did not stay a minute longer than was necessary at Portland Place, and Jimmy spent the rest of the night, in company with his chief, calling out the detective reserves and establishing police barriers on all the roads leading out of town. At six o'clock he went home exhausted, ready to sleep the clock round, and had a moment of regret that the wideawake Albert was not at home to minister to his bodily comfort.

He threw up the sash of his window, preparatory to sleeping, and his hand was on the cord of the blind to pull it down, when he saw a man walking slowly along on the opposite side of the street. A light overcoat was buttoned to his chin, for the morning was chilly, and he wore a soft felt hat pulled down over his eyes. The sun had risen, and a sprinkle of early-risers, workmen and tradesmen were in the street. There was nothing to differentiate between the man in the light overcoat and any other wayfarer, except his leisurely gait. Something in his walk seemed familiar, and Jim strove vainly to place him. A pair of field-glasses hung on a hook behind the door, and Jim took out the binoculars and walked again to the window just as the man came immediately opposite. At the moment Jim put the glasses to his eyes, the walker looked up.

" Good God ! " gasped the detective.

The saunterer was Rex Walton !

CHAPTER XIII

LEANING out of the window, Jim shouted. Either the man could not or would not hear. Turning quickly, Jim snatched up an overcoat and flew down the stone stairs of the flat. When he came out into the street, the saunterer had disappeared.

Jimmy saw a policeman coming toward him and beckoned him, and the man hurried, surmising by his undressed appearance a possible burglary. Rapidly Jim introduced himself and put his question to the officer.

" A man in a light overcoat, sir ? Yes, I saw one ; he was walking on the other sidewalk, and he got into a car just before you came out. In fact, there *is* the car"—he pointed to the back of a machine which was disappearing in the distance. " Have you lost anything ? "

" No, no," said Jim impatiently. " Did you notice the car . . . . what it was like . . . . its number ? "

But the policeman had not taken the number. All he knew was that it was a small Ford car, with the hood up and the curtains drawn, that had been waiting at the corner of the next block.

" It couldn't have been there five minutes," he said. " I was on the corner that time ago, and there were no cars in the street except a butcher's van."

All thought of or inclination for sleep had now vanished from Jim's mind, and, climbing up the stairs again, he jumped into a bath, shaved and changed, and when Joan Walton saw him an hour later there was little in his voice to suggest that he had been without sleep for twenty-four hours.

"Has Rex been here?" was the first question he asked.

"No," she said eagerly. "Is he found?"

"I've seen him. I'll swear it was he—it could not have been anybody else. If I'd been dressed I might have caught him."

He told her of the amazing apparition that had greeted his tired eyes that morning.

"Thank God he's alive!" she said. "I don't worry a bit what is the explanation, but he's alive!"

Jimmy was looking at her curiously. The pert schoolgirl that he had thought of as Joan Walton had vanished, and no trace of that angular girl remained. The new Joan Walton was a revelation—she took his breath away at times. He had never before been sufficiently interested in any girl to observe the phenomenon of that vital development which bridges the gulf between child and womanhood, and now he went instinctively to springtide for comparison: the green of young shoots, the bare, raspy flags that in a night became decorated with bloom and flower.

"Old girl, you've had a bad time," he said, and she nodded.

"Yes, pretty bad. Rex is all I have—and that sounds mawkish to a hardened old police officer, but——"

"Old, but not hardened," said Jimmy, remembering with a blush the violets in the Tower. "Age suits me, and it is well, for since Rex went, every day and in every way I'm getting greyer and greyer!"

He dropped his hand on her shoulder, an old gesture of his. In other days there was something of fondness and something of patronage in that movement. Now he felt awkward and pulled his hand away. She felt the restraint and looked at him quickly.

"Jimmy, you're scared of me?" she challenged.

"I am," he admitted.

"Well, don't be; and please do not treat me as a grown-up young lady or I shall simper! Rex is safe!"

She drew a long breath and smiled. He had not seen her smile since that tragic wedding day. Usually Jimmy did not discuss police affairs with anybody, but to-day he was in a communicative mood, and she learnt of the ordeal through which he had passed.

"I remember Parker, but not very distinctly," she said. "He is the sort of person who goes with the furniture. Is Mr. Coleman upset?"

Jimmy chuckled.

"He is outraged," he said. "But this discovery brings us a little nearer, Joan. And when, on top of that, I find that Rex is alive and well, there's a big load gone off my mind. No more telephone trouble?"

"No-no," she hesitated, "not exactly."

"What do you mean?" he asked quickly.

"Well, I had rather a queer experience with the telephone," she said. "I didn't intend to talk about it, because it's probably something which can very easily be explained. And everybody tries to find clues for you, don't they, Jimmy?" she said. "Now I'm going to get you some coffee, and then you can go straight home and go to bed."

Jim waited until she had ordered breakfast—it was only half-past seven, and he had had to arouse her household to gain admission—and then asked:

"What happened at the telephone?"

"It was a little thing, and hardly worth while talking about," said Joan. "But as I've already been so indiscreet and alarming, I'd better tell you everything. Two or three times yesterday, when I had occasion to call a number, I had a feeling that somebody was listening. It wasn't a 'hunch,' as you'd call it; it was based on the fact that, as soon as I lifted the receiver from the hook and called the number, I'm perfectly certain I heard an interference on the wire. And once, when I was trying to get you, I heard a voice say, 'Shut up, she's talking.' It was ever so faint, like a whispered voice, but my receiver is an unusually loud one. Do you know what I mean?"

Jimmy whistled.

"Yes, of course, somebody was listening-in," he nodded. "We can fix that. I'm glad you told me."

"It may have a very simple explanation," said the girl, "and I may be leading you to a mare's nest. That, and the man outside, which is probably another delusion of mine, got me rather worried yesterday, and I called you up last night, and afterwards was glad you were not in"

Jimmy stared at her.

"Woman," he said reproachfully, "you're full of mystery. What do you mean by 'the man outside'?"

"There has been for days a man loafing about, walking up and down the street, but always within reach of this door. Last night I saw another. The first wore a hard derby hat, the second a soft felt. He was there when I looked out at two o'clock this morning, and the only time he wasn't there was when the policeman came along, though he reappeared as soon as the officer had passed."

"Is he there now?" said Jimmy.

"I was wondering," said the girl, and walked to the window.

The drawing-room looked out upon the square, and after a moment's scrutiny she pointed.

"There is the day man," she said immediately.

Jim went to her side and looked in the direction her finger was pointing. Standing near a pillar-box was a man in a blue trench coat. With his hands deep in his pockets, he was engaged apparently in an aimless scrutiny of the passing traffic.

"Are you sure that is the fellow who was here yesterday?"

She nodded. The loafer was too far away to distinguish his features, but Jimmy, with his uncanny memory for figures, placed him instantly.

"He'll wait, I think," he said carefully. "Now I'll confine myself to coffee, for if I eat I shall sleep, and for the next hour or so it is necessary that I should be very wide awake."

"Do you know who it is?"

"He looks like a friend of mine," said Jim carelessly. "Joan, have you ever seen an old-fashioned melodrama where the hero says 'The plot thickens'?"

"I've never seen such a play," smiled the girl, "but the expression seems familiar. Why?"

"It's so thick now," said Jim, "that you could walk on it! Will you oblige me by keeping in your room at the back of the house for the next quarter of an hour?"

"But why?" she asked again in surprise.

"Because modesty is my long suit," said Jimmy, "and if I know that your eyes are glued on me I shall feel nervous."

He left the house and strolled toward the pillar-box, and as he came the man turned his back and began walking slowly away from him. He reached the corner of the block and half turned so that his back would be toward the detective as he passed. But Jimmy did not pass; he stopped, and tapped the saunterer lightly on the shoulder, and the man turned round with an expression of innocent wonder.

"How are you, 'Farringdon'?" said Jimmy. "I thought you were in 'boob.'"

"I fear you are mistaken, sir," said the man with affected gentility. "My name is Wilthorpe, and I'm waiting to meet a friend."

"He's a hell of a long time coming," said Jimmy without heat. "And in the meantime you'll come along with me, and if you pull a gun I'll murder you!"

"You've made a slight mistake, I fear," said the man, not attempting to move. And then he saw something in Jimmy's eye that made him change his tone. "What's the game, Sepping?" he asked unpleasantly. "Haven't you 'busies'* anything better to do than hound a fellow down because he's been in boob?"

"Are you coming?" said Jimmy.

*"Busy" means "busy fellow," the ship's argot for detective.

" Certainly," said Farringdon Brown, and fell in at the detective's side.

He was a tall, swarthy man, who had at some time been a porter in Smithfield Market. An Australian by birth, he was on the books of the police of three European countries as a dangerous man.

" You're never satisfied till you get a man in bad, people like you," he said. " You never give a fellow a chance of going straight. The moment he starts looking for work, you're there to see that he doesn't get it."

" Cease your badinage," said Jimmy.

They were passing down a quiet residential street, and with the exception of a servant girl cleaning some steps there was nobody in sight. Suddenly, and without the slightest warning, " Farringdon " Brown's big fist swung round. It missed Jimmy's face by the fraction of an inch, and the next second the detective had grappled with his prisoner. Jimmy's throw was neat and clean, and Farringdon Brown went with a thud to the concrete sidewalk, and before he could recover his senses Jim had turned him on his face and snapped a pair of handcuffs about his wrists.

" You're a nasty fellow," said Jim as he jerked him up.

The dazed Farringdon Brown said nothing.

At the police station, when he was searched, two fully loaded Browning pistols, one in each pocket, were discovered, and after the doctor had dressed the scalp wound which Mr. Brown had acquired in the course of his abortive attempt to escape, Jimmy interviewed him in his cell.

" I'm charging you with being a suspected person," he said. " And that means you're going down for three years. If you're sensible, Brown, you'll 'squeak.'"

"What have I got to 'squeak' about?" growled the man.

"Who employed you? What was your job?"

A sardonic smile lightened the swarthy face.

"Do you think I'd get any better time if I told you what I was there for?" he asked. "No, Mr. Busy, there's no 'squeak' coming from me. I like Dartmoor, anyway. It's so bracing. There are no squeakers in this outfit, take it from me, Sepping. Three years' 'boob's'* paradise to what's coming to the man who 'squeaks.' Besides which, do you think anybody who employed me would give me his card to hand to the first copper that came along? Use your intelligence, Sepping. I'm surprised at you!"

"Was it Joe Felman?" asked Jimmy suddenly, watching the man closely, and he could have sworn he saw a look of surprise in Brown's eyes.

"Joe? What do you mean? I don't know anything about Joe. Sepping, what do you think I am, a record department? Nobody's seen Joe for years."

"That's a lie," said Jimmy calmly. "Joe's been employed as butler by Mr. Coleman in Portland Place. That is rather a staggerer for you. And now he has disappeared."

He saw the frown gather and clear.

"I guess he *has* disappeared if you found out where he was living!" said Brown. "When did he go, Mr. Sepping?"

This was significant. Jimmy was telling the crook something that he did not already know, and obviously the detection of the mysterious

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* 'Boob' or 'booby-hutch' — prison.

Parker was a matter of some concern for him. Why? Jim wondered. And then it dawned upon him.

"Joe Felman was the man who employed you to watch the Waltons' house," he said suddenly. "Don't deny it, because he told everything before he went."

But Brown was too old a bird to be caught by the alleged confession of the confederate.

"Let him squeak," he said. "You'll do some squeaking before you're through, Sepping."

And on this ominous note Jim left.

CHAPTER XIV

THE Kupie mystery was becoming even more involved. But out of the tangle emerged one fact: Kupie's life was deep-rooted in the underworld. The criminal gang of fiction had, as Jimmy knew, no existence. The master-brain who took his pick of the cleverest criminals at large was, however, a very frequent occurrence. There were men in town, clever, unscrupulous and well-to-do, who lived carefully on the right side of the law, and whose names did not appear in the contemporary histories of crime. They neither stole nor received; but the burglar who wanted money for a new kit of tools, the fugitive from justice who needed funds to effect his escape, the cardsharper who wanted capital, those knew where to go at the critical moment.

Some of these mysterious forces were known to Jim and to every other highly-placed police officer. There was a good-class hotel in the West End of London, the proprietor and manager of which made tens of thousands a year by an illicit traffic in stolen notes. There was always a bed for a man "on the run"; he could find passports at a day's notice, and had probably smuggled more wanted men out of the country than any other.

There was a small jeweller who had a shop within a stone's throw of Trafalgar Square who dealt exclusively with stolen gems. The Prime Minister of England, who drove past his house every day, earned less than a tenth of the income that came into the coffers of the weak-eyed little jeweller.

These were not only forces in themselves, but they controlled and promoted other crimes for their own protection. Jimmy and Bill Dicker went through a list of likely Kupies and rejected them all.

"Any of them could hire a man to murder you for fifty pounds," said Dicker; "and if you start trying to smell out the people that Farringdon has worked for, you'd have to put twenty men in the dock. But it makes it easier, now we know that there's a professional behind Kupie. It's these amateurs that baffle, because there's no starting place when you come to look for them. And the vast majority of people are criminal-minded; there are not five thousand truly honest men in the whole of the country!"

"That's a sweeping statement," remarked Jimmy.

"It's true," said Bill Dicker seriously. "Suppose it was known to-morrow that there was a horse running on one of the race-tracks that had been doped up to his eyes, or had been substituted—that is to say, some better class horse had been run to impersonate the poorer type of animal. Suppose, I say, that every man in the country knew this, and thought the secret was peculiarly his own. Why, they'd suffocate the bookmakers! They'd be so eager to compound the felony that all the shops and factories would be shut, and thousands of special trains would be running to the race-track! The only difference between a real criminal and an amateur is that the professional doesn't squeak. What about Nippy Knowles? You say he owes something to Walton."

"What about him?" asked Jimmy, interested.

"Try him," said Bill Dicker emphatically "Nippy is hand in glove with most of the gangs, and does their high-class work. He may give you a line to Joe Felman, and it is worth trying."

Mr. Knowles was not at his place of residence when Jimmy called, and his landlady, with that discretion which is the property of all good chatelaines, had not the slightest idea of where he was, when he would return, or the hour he had left. There were three places where Nippy might be met, and Jimmy was fortunate in hitting upon a little Soho restaurant at his first investigation, for Nippy was discussing a solitary chop; and as it was the hour when most of his friends were still fast asleep, the restaurant was comparatively empty. The red-haired man looked up over his pince-nez as Jimmy entered.

"Good morning, inspector," he said cheerfully. "Any news of Mr. Walton? I've been reading the papers, and it looks a pretty bad case to me. Do you think he has gone mad?"

"It is very unlikely, Nippy," said Jim as he sat down; "and I think I shall find him. By the way, he was a friend of yours, wasn't he?"

"Not exactly a friend," said Nippy, "but he was decent. There are so few civilians who are decent—and by civilians I mean people who are not in our line of business. I was hard up; he lent me money and gave me good advice. If I'd listened to him"—he drank his beer very slowly and set down the empty glass, gazing at it with a mournful expression—"if I'd listened to him there would have been no Julia. And I should have been an honest man, getting up at six every morning and working till six every night. earning enough to keep body and soul together, instead of being a low-down crook who has plenty of money and can go to bed when he likes."

Jim leant across the table and lowered his voice.

"Nippy, where is Joe Felman ?"

A blank expression appeared in Nippy's eyes.

"I don't know the name." He was perjuring himself, and Jimmy knew it. "What is his graft ?"

"'Black,'" said Jimmy, and Nippy shook his head.

"I don't know the 'black' people; they're not the kind of folk I like to meet. 'Black's' dirty, and always will be. They tried it on me because they're the dogs that eat dogs. This here Joe Felman was the worst of the lot; he's got a bad record."

Jimmy overlooked the trifling inconsistency of his companion, who had not heard the name of Joe Felman a few minutes before.

"He was employed by Mr. Coleman in Portland Place," said Jimmy, and the little burglar nodded.

"Has he skipped ? Because, if he has, I've heard nothing of him. He hasn't been seen in town, I know, because he's got a couple of gunmen working a job for him."

"'Farringdon' Brown ?" suggested Jimmy. "I pinched him this morning."

"Indeed ?" said Nippy politely. "I don't hold with gunmen. In fact, I don't hold with anybody who carries lethal weapons. It's cowardly. If you're caught by a copper, it's his job to pinch you, isn't it ? You can hold him up with a gun, but he's got to come on, even if he gets killed. So you may say that, when you carry a gun, you're carrying a rope. It's not fair on the coppers either; they've got their duty to do, and it's dirty to kill a man for doing his job. The other gunman I saw yesterday; he was in here—and he's the worst. Maybe you know him; if you don't, I can't squeak on him, because squeaking isn't *my* job. I can tell you this, though, that if Joe has skipped, these fellows may know something about him."

He leant back in his chair, chewing a toothpick, and his eyes wore a far-away look.

"Mr. Sepping," he said, "to every artist there comes a moment of inspiration. Some say that it's love that does it, but, so far as I am concerned, Julia's the only woman in my life, and she's no inspiration!"

"What is inspiring you, Nippy?" asked Jim, humouring the little man.

"I don't know," he answered gravely, "but I want to do something big. I'd like to rob the Bank of England, if you understand me. Not because there's any money left, but so that I could say that I've done it. I'm tired of these little hooky jobs, where you get away with a hundred or a thousand or so. I've got enough money to live on for the rest of my life—that surprises you?"

"Nothing ever surprises me, Nippy," said Jim. "Maybe you'll get your chance. And when you're caught, as you will be, I'll come along and have a talk with you, and you shall tell me all about it."

"I shan't be caught," said Nippy with emphasis. "Any fool can burgle the Bank of England and be caught."

Jim talked to the man for a little while longer, and then said good-bye and walked toward the door.

"Mr. Sepping," said Nippy Knowles, and Jimmy turned. The burglar beckoned him with a jerk of his head. "You're on Kupie's list," he said in a low voice; "and if you take my advice, you'll get the other gunman before he gets you."

"Where shall I get him?" said Jimmy with a smile.

"He's waiting for you," said Nippy, "outside the door. Good luck!"

Jimmy stepped out into the street alert and watchful. Any one of the half a dozen loungers who were in view might have been the gunman, but his quick scrutiny revealed no familiar face. He walked warily toward the main thoroughfare, and stopping at a shop window ostensibly to examine the contents, he shot a swift glance backward. He had mentally photographed every one of the idlers. Now he saw the man, whom he had identified as being one of those who had been watching the restaurant. He was a stoutish man, who wore a hard felt hat on the back of his head and a blue silk handkerchief in place of a collar. He was smoking thoughtfully the stump of a cigar, and he, too, was looking into a window. Jim thought quickly. The news of Brown's arrest would have spread by now, and this man would not be following him if he did not mean business.

He reached Wardour Street and turned sharply, crossing the road at a quicker pace. When he glanced back he saw his pursuer stroll aimlessly round the corner. The man's hands were in his pockets. Jim, looking up and down the street, caught a police patrol coming slowly toward him, and the other man saw the policeman too, for he crossed the road. The moment was at hand, and Jimmy swung round to face his pursuer. Apparently he did not notice the detective, or observe anything unusual in his waiting attitude, and he went on, humming a song. He passed the police man, and, reaching the end of a narrow street, stopped.

"*Plop!*"

There was no explosion, only a sound as if a cork were being drawn. The bullet smacked the lamp-post, and its spongy splinters rattled against a shop window. Turning, the gunman sped like the wind, and when Jim and the policeman reached the corner he had vanished.

CHAPTER XV

MR. LAWFORD COLLETT lived in Park Lane, and from the windows of his small flat he commanded a sideways view of Hyde Park. A man of few occupations, taciturn to a fault, he could count the number of his friends on the fingers of one hand. He was known as a shrewd though somewhat bloodless lawyer, who had a passion for compromise. Mr. Collett settled out of court most of the cases in which he was engaged, for he professed a profound contempt for the intelligence of juries, and had no great opinion of the leading advocates of the day.

If he had vices, they were not outstanding. He was studious and a little furtive. Jimmy had met him half a dozen times professionally, and was no nearer to knowing him on the last occasion than he had been on his introduction.

He had an office in Henrietta Street, Covent Garden, even more restricted in its space than was his flat. If Mr. Lawford Collett was suspected of sentiment, his retention of this tiny suite was understandable; for here he had started business and for years had laboured desperately, finding his clients in the neighbouring court at Bow Street. Then fortune had come to him, and money flowed into his account, and he might, had he wished, have taken more pretentious premises, and more in keeping with his position. But the Henrietta Street establishment sufficed him, although he no longer made his appearance before the magistrates on behalf of disreputable clients.

It was generally known that he was the only lawyer in London who had been successful in checking Kupie; and in consequence Kupie's victims gravitated toward his shabby office, hoping that he would find as easy a way out for them as he found for Sir John Diller, one of Kupie's first "marks." Certain compromising letters of Sir John's had fallen into the hands of this mysterious blackmailer, and Lawford Collett had recovered them without costing the baronet a penny, other than the modest cheque which he gave to the lawyer for his services.

Mr. Collett sat in his office, listening patiently to the woes of a woman client who was anxious to be relieved of the burden of matrimony. His long, sad face looked even more melancholy under the strain of absorbing another person's worries; his eyes were closed; his long, thin hands were clasped in his lap. Presently the voluble lady paused in her recital.

"It is very sad, of course," murmured Mr. Collett. "But these things happen, even with the best of men. Now don't you think, my dear Lady Jelling, that it is possible to settle this matter without going into court? After all, you do not want your name and private life blazoned in the newspapers? Now let me suggest . . ."

He was a suave and persuasive man, and his client left him with a feeling that she had been extraordinarily magnanimous and noble. Collett watched her go with a sigh of relief. He touched his bell.

"Has Mr. Sepping arrived?" he asked the girl who came in.

"Yes, sir, he's just come."

"Show him in, please," said Mr. Collett gently.

He was scribbling the notes of the interview in his cramped shorthand when Jimmy was ushered in.

"Sit down, Sepping. It's such a long time since I was honoured by the visit of a police officer that I've forgotten the formula. Will you have a cigar or a drink, or both? What is the news, by the way? Have you found this wretched man Parker?"

"No," said Jimmy.

"Of course, it's absurd to ask whether you've found Walton—what is behind Walton's extraordinary behaviour, Sepping?"

He took a long, thin cigar out of a drawer and lit it. It was rank, and its aroma was an offence to Jimmy's sensitive nostrils; but the eccentricity of Mr. Collett's taste in cigars was notorious.

"There is no news of Parker, and Rex is still amongst the missing," said Jimmy cheerfully.

Collett opened his eyes and looked at the visitor.

"You also were nearly amongst the missing, if one can believe the evening newspapers," he said significantly. "Not that I take these accounts too literally. Did you find the man who shot at you?"

"No, he vanished. In fact, everybody connected with this infernal Kupie business seems to have the trick of melting into thin air. We've searched every house on each side of the street; we've delved into cellars and slipped about on roofs; but the Digger——"

"The Digger?" said the other, interested.

"The Digger is our gentleman. He is an Australian crook, known better to the American police than to us—he has served a term at Sing-Sing.

I've come to see you, Collett, because it struck me that in bygone days you must have been pretty well acquainted with every bad man in town."

Lawford Collett laughed softly.

"The fashion in bad men changes," he said, "and there is amongst them an extraordinarily high rate of mortality. I don't suppose two of the men who passed through my hands in my early practice are alive or at liberty. As you probably know, I've given up that sort of work; the only time I go into court is when some wealthy jackass is charged with being drunk in charge of a motor-car. Whereupon I produce the necessary perjurers, either to get him off before the unsympathetic beak, or have the sentence quashed before the lenient bench at the sessions."

"Did Parker, or Felman, come your way?"

Collett shook his head.

"I've been looking up Felman's history," he said, "and I notice that most of his convictions have been at assizes. Even now I can't believe that that inoffensive old gentleman was an expert blackmailer."

"Do you think he's Kupie?" asked Jim bluntly.

"I don't know." Mr. Collett was very thoughtful. "His handwriting is certainly similar to that which came over Kupie's signature. But it's the kind of copperplate that might be anybody's writing. It seems to me, considering the matter, that it is much more likely that Parker, or Felman, was merely an agent. In the first place, I don't think Felman had the courage. Dora told me that the night they had the burglar at Portland Place the old fellow was scared—absolutely shivering with fright. That doesn't sound like Kupie, does it? All my transactions with the brute reveal him as a very bold person indeed."

"There is one other question I want to ask you, Collett," said Jim. "Has your office ever been burgled?"

Lawford Collett raised his thin eyebrows.

"Good Lord, no!" he said. "Why should it be burgled? Burglars do not break into lawyers' offices."

"That is where you're wrong," said Jim quietly, "for in the past two years the office of every prominent lawyer in London, and a very large number in the provinces, has been broken into by thieves."

Lawford Collett sat up.

"Do you really mean that? I've seen nothing about it in the newspapers—I suppose I shouldn't, because our profession aren't inclined to give particulars to the press. But is that so?"

Jim nodded.

"Dicker and I found it out by accident, when we were looking through statistics which had been compiled at the Yard. The curious thing is that nobody has associated Kupie with these burglaries."

"Do you?" asked the other quickly.

"I certainly do," replied Jim. "In every case where a man or a woman has been victimised by Kupie we have found that, some weeks or months previous, his lawyer's office has been broken into. That was the case with an unfortunate girl who committed suicide some years ago." He did not mention the name of Rex Walton's first love.

Collett was quiet for some time, and was evidently turning the matter over in his mind.

"Extraordinary," he said. "And of course, if you have given the matter investigation, I wouldn't dream of suggesting that it was merely a coincidence.

[illegible]

[illegible]

[illegible]

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[illegible]

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[illegible]

[illegible]

a type of mentality which was foreign to him and just a little beyond his comprehension. Although Lawford Collett could not, by any stretch of imagination, be described as his friend, it was nevertheless true that his acquaintanceship with Mr. Coleman's legal adviser was the nearest approach to friendship that he had ever formed with any member of that profession.

Jimmy went home early, for he was beginning to realise that he had been without sleep for a considerable number of hours; and after he had called up Joan Walton, and found that everything was normal, he went to bed, and his head had hardly touched the pillow before he was asleep.

He was awakened at seven o'clock, his usual hour for rising, by the arrival in his room of Albert, bearing the morning tray.

"No news, sir," said Albert. "I've been all round that country and have heard nothing of Mr. Walton. Nobody's seen him. There was only one mysterious cottage in the neighbourhood, but I found out all there was to be known about the people who came there for week-ends."

Jimmy yawned and stretched himself.

"I never had much hope you would find anything, Albert," he said as he sat up in bed and took his cup of tea. "Ring up the Yard and ask if there is any news."

Albert had gone for some time, and returned with information that brought Jimmy out of bed in double-quick time.

"The inspector in charge, sir, says that Mr. Collett's office has been burgled in the night. It's only just been reported."

Jimmy whistled. It was a remarkable coincidence that, only the previous day, he had been discussing the possibility of Collett's deed boxes affording a temptation to the mysterious burglar. He took his bath and dressed hurriedly, and half an hour later was standing amidst the debris of the lawyer's office.

" Moses ! " said Jimmy in amazement, and looked at the wreckage.

Every deed box had been removed from the shelves, opened and its contents scattered on the floor. The desk had been smashed, and obviously an attempt had been made to open a small safe which stood in the corner of the room. Lawford Collett had not arrived when Jimmy appeared upon the scene, but he had been notified, the inspector told him, and was on his way.

" How was this burglary discovered ? " he asked.

" One of our men on patrol duty saw somebody come out of the door at half-past five, and walk away rapidly," said the inspector. " My man thought at the time that he came from the shop next door. There is a wholesale fruiterer's office up above, and the clerks are usually at work half an hour after Covent Garden opens. When the officer came along, he saw that the door leading up to Mr. Collett's office was ajar. Immediately he went in and made an investigation.

" Did he recognise the burglar ? "

" No, sir, he said he only saw his back, and he was wearing a long overcoat."

" Only one man ? "

" There was only one, sir. At least, that was all that my officer saw."

A few minutes later Lawford Collett arrived on the scene, and his astonishment when the spectacle of his disordered office was revealed to him was almost comic. He gazed, speechless, upon the litter, and presently made a dart to one corner of the room and lifted up a box. Jimmy saw the name of Mr. Coleman inscribed in small white letters. The box had been ripped open and was empty. Some of its contents were heaped in a corner. These documents Collett turned over rapidly, and then began a search of the floor.

"Is anything missing ?" asked Jimmy, an interested spectator.

"Dora's ante-nuptial contract has gone."

It was news to Jimmy that an ante-nuptial contract had been drawn up, though he realised immediately that a cautious man like Rex Walton would have gone into this formality.

"Anything else ?" asked Jimmy.

"I don't know yet," said Collett, still engaged in his search.

Apparently it was a vain one, for presently he got up and went to examine the broken drawers of his desk.

"That is all, I think," he said after a scrutiny of the papers heaped upon the table. "The safe hasn't been forced, has it ?"

A thought struck Jimmy, and he turned to the Scotland Yard man who had arrived on the scene soon after him.

"Take a car and bring Nippy Knowles here. I want to see him. I don't for one moment suppose that it is Nippy's work—it is much too inartistic ; but I'd like to ask him a few questions."

"Who is Nippy ?" asked Collett.

"He is a lad of the village," said Jimmy cryptically.

It was nearly an hour before the man returned with a dishevelled and indignant Nippy.

"Am I the only safebreaker in London that you have to send for me, Mr. Sepping ?" he asked reproachfully, his eyes surveying the room with a professional interest. Then they rested on the safe and he chuckled.

"Mug's work!" he said.

"That is just what I want to know," said Jimmy. "Is this the job of a professional burglar?"

"Professional!" scoffed the crook. "Why, a child in arms could have made a better job of it! Look at those dents in the safe; they used a cold chisel and hammered just above the lock. He wouldn't break that safe in a thousand years. It's another of these lawyers' burglaries, isn't it, Mr. Sepping?"

"You've heard of them, eh?" said Jimmy, eyeing him keenly.

"Of course I've heard of 'em!" said the other scornfully. "And what's more, I've seen one of the jobs, and it was much better done than this. Personally, I'd no more think of robbing a lawyer's office than I'd think of breaking into Wandsworth Prison. There's nothing worth pinching, and if there was you'd need a staff of experts to get rid of the stuff."

He examined the safe again, and rubbed its face with his sleeve.

"Why do you do that?" asked Jimmy.

"He's an amateur," said Nippy calmly; "and being an amateur, he left his finger-prints, and it's no job of mine to let 'em stay. 'Live and let live' is one of my mottoes, and 'Thou shalt not be a "policeman"' is another."

In the hour of waiting for Nippy, Lawford Collett had reduced the chaos to a minimum. He had gathered together the scattered deeds and documents with which the floor was covered, and had replaced them in boxes.

"It will take a week to get these things properly sorted," he said. "I wonder what the devil was after?"

His attitude toward the burglary had surprised Jimmy. He expected this phlegmatic man to raise Cain when he saw the indignity to which his bureau had been subjected. But Collett had displayed remarkable philosophy in his moment of trial. It seemed that the burglary had not so much excited as quietened him. His expression was even more serious and melancholy than it had been, and at first Jimmy thought that this was because something of special value had been stolen.

"Nothing except the ante-nuptial contract," said Collett when the detective asked him again; "and I can't see that that is of any particular value, especially as Walton has vanished, and it is extremely unlikely that the marriage will take place. Coleman, by the way, has expressed that doubt to me."

"When was it drawn up?" asked Jimmy. "The contract, I mean?"

"On the twelfth—was it the twelfth? They were to have been married on the fourteenth. Yes, it was the twelfth, two days before the ceremony was to take place."

"You have nothing belonging to Rex?"

Collett shook his head.

"He was not a client of mine," he said "This is the only deed I had, and that, of course, was held on behalf of Dora Coleman."

Jimmy went home to breakfast, more mystified than ever. He had the dubious satisfaction of knowing that Kupie—for he did not doubt it was the work of Kupie—had signalised his interest in the marriage of Rex Walton in the usual way. But the why of it was still obscure and beyond explanation.

He had his breakfast and went to his office

No further details concerning the robbery had come through, and there was no word of Collett, who had promised that, in the event of his making a further discovery of loss, he would notify Jimmy instantly.

Jimmy Sepping sat down to review the position. It was necessary that he should detach himself from all personal prejudice, that he should forget that the man he sought was his best friend and Joan Walton's brother. Jimmy was a man who thought best with a pen in his hand, and, drawing a sheet of paper from his stationery rack, he wrote the essential facts :—

> " On May 14th, Rex Walton attended 973, Portland Place, preparatory to his marriage on the same morning at the Marylebone Registrar's Office with Dora Coleman. Going out of the room, apparently to bring his wedding present to the bride, he disappeared, and has only once been seen since, namely, by me. Since his disappearance it has been discovered that his entire fortune, approximately a million pounds, has also vanished. Walton had been the object of Kupie's attentions, Kupie being an anonymous letter writer and blackmailer. Kupie had threatened that, if Rex married Dora Coleman, his fortune would be taken from him.
>
> " Questions :
>
> " 1. Why did Rex disappear ?
>
> " 2. What connection is there between his going and the taking of his million ?
>
> " 3. What association is there between the robbery at Lawford Collett's office and the mystery of Rex Walton ?
>
> " 4. Why has Kupie employed desperadoes to watch Joan and to shoot me ? "

Then there was Miller. What part had Miller played, and what was the explanation of that letter which had sent him to a suicide's grave? Kupie did nothing aimlessly. There was a purpose behind his every seemingly innocent action, and the letter to Miller was something more than an ordinary blackmailer's threat.

Jimmy was certain of one thing: Kupie had written to Miller, foreseeing the effect that this revelation of his duplicity would have upon him. Miller was killed by design, as assuredly as though Kupie himself had shot him.

He was musing when there was a knock at the door and an officer entered the room, and Jimmy, looking up, recognised the chief photographer of police head-quarters.

"I've photographed those ashes, sir," he said "Would you like to see a print?"

"See a print?" said Jimmy, and then remembered. "Oh, you mean the ashes which were in the drawer of Mr. Walton's desk? Has anything come out?"

The man nodded.

"Only one scrap of paper," he said, and laid a big photograph on the desk under Jimmy's eyes. "The words are faint, but you can read them."

"What is this?" asked Jimmy, frowning.

"It is evidently a marriage certificate, sir."

Jimmy read and gasped. The name of the bridegroom was Rex Hubert Walton; the bride's name was missing. But what was significant was the date. It was the 13th of May.

This fact was glaringly obvious: that when Rex Walton had gone to Portland Place to meet his bride he was already married—had been married the day previously!

CHAPTER XVI

WITH the photograph in his pocket, Jim hurried to the Central Registry to make a search. He had not gone far before he found the entry. It was the record of a marriage between Rex and a girl who was described as " May Liddiart." Her address was given as the Grand Central Hotel, and the marriage had been celebrated at the Chelsea Registrar's Office.

He jotted down particulars of this amazing wedding and drove to Chelsea. And here he encountered his first set-back. The couple had been married by an acting registrar, whilst the chief was on his holiday, and the acting registrar was at that moment dangerously ill in hospital. A clerk, however, remembered the wedding, and described Rex faithfully.

" What was the lady like ? " asked Jimmy.

The clerk shook his head.

" I couldn't tell you, sir. She was wearing black and she was heavily veiled. Only the registrar who married her and the two taximen who witnesesd the wedding were present besides the bride and the bridegroom."

The names and addresses of the taxicab drivers were fortunately available, and that evening Jimmy interviewed them both. Neither of them, however, could give him any clue as to the identity of May

Liddiart. One of the cabs had been picked up in the street by Rex, the other had been taken from the rank by a veiled lady.

"I couldn't recognise her, anyway, because, even while the ceremony was going on, she only raised her veil once, and I was standing behind," said the more communicative of the men.

"What rank were you on when she called you?"

"Top of Haymarket, sir. She came in one cab—I saw her get out. Then, after the cab had moved on, she crossed to the rank and told me to drive to the registrar's office at Chelsea."

There was nothing to be learned further than this, and Jimmy went back to his office completely baffled and bewildered. All his conceptions, all his estimates of Rex had been shattered by this amazing discovery. Rex was the soul of honour, and yet, the day before he was due to marry Dora Coleman, he had contracted a marriage with another woman! Was this the secret of the disappearance? But he could not fit in this new valuation of his friend. Although Rex had been nervous at the wedding breakfast, he had not behaved like a man who had that tremendous secret on his soul. Jimmy was satisfied in his mind that if Rex had done this thing, had committed this appalling act of perfidy against the woman he professed to love, he would never have dared to face her on the wedding morning. There was no reason why he should. If he had to disappear, why not disappear before he came to Portland Place?

In his dilemma he went to Bill Dicker and put all the facts before him, and the big man listened, puffing thoughtfully at his pipe.

"Do you think it was somebody who impersonated Walton?" asked Dicker.

Jimmy had thought of this.

"That idea occurred to me, but the description given of Rex was so clear and unmistakable, both by the taxi-driver and the clerk at the registrar's. It could not have been an impersonation. I saw him, you remember, that morning in the Tower. He gave me not the slightest hint that anything was troubling him save the letter from Kupie. I know him well enough to be sure that I could have detected something in his manner if the prospect of marrying May Liddiart was at the back of his mind."

Bill Dicker knocked out the ashes of his pipe and slowly recharged the huge bowl.

"The whole thing is queer. I've been down to see Casey."

"Casey?" said Jimmy with a puzzled frown. Already the recollection of his kidnapping had been obliterated by the newer problems which confronted him. "Oh, I remember. You mean the gambling-house keeper?"

Bill Dicker nodded.

"I was keen to discover why he tried to 'shop' you. It wasn't like Casey, because he is a man of limited intelligence, and I'm perfectly sure he could not have thought out the scheme on his own. He took a lot of persuading, but at last he admitted that you had been brought, drugged, to the house at midnight, and having been admitted through the back part of the premises, were carried upstairs to bed."

"By whom?" asked Jim, not unnaturally interested.

"As to that," said Dicker, "he refused to give information. Obviously it was Kupie, because Casey is a born 'policeman,' and would sell his own mother if you paid him the right kind of money. Kupie terrifies these people they dare not squeak, and Casey is a typical Kupie-tool. Of course, it brings us nearer to brother Parker. Parker doped you; Parker sent the letter which brought you to Portland Place; Parker disappeared immediately after he thought he had got you in bad. Therefore we may say that Parker is officially Kupie. Read those; they will depress you."

He pushed forward a huge pile of reports that stood at his elbow, and Jimmy went through them rapidly. They were police notes from every part of the country. Some were short, some were loquacious, but all had the same story to tell—no sign of Parker, no sign of Walton, no sign of his missing wealth.

"Parker is in London," said Jimmy quietly. "That kind of bird doesn't go very far out of town. And he is wise, because London is the best place for a wanted man to hide."

Bill Dicker, pipe in mouth, was gazing absently through the window on to the Embankment.

"Miller was in it, of course—the disappearance of Walton, I mean," he said. "Then, because they thought he might squeak, they sent him a letter that drove him mad. A queer mixture of official and crook was Miller. He loved money, but he was strong for the dignity of his position. He didn't know Kupie, though. If he'd known Kupie, the letter wouldn't have worried him. He would have 'twisted the book' on Kupie, and crawled out of his own trouble, possibly with honours. Now the question is, Sepping, who has got to know about this marriage besides ourselves?"

That was a question which was already worrying Jimmy.

"I can't tell Dora Coleman," he said decidedly. "That would be a brutal thing to do. But I think I ought to tell Joan."

"Joan?" The detective lifted his eyebrows, and Jimmy blushed.

"I mean Miss Walton. She is an old friend of mine," he said sheepishly, and was glad to escape any further cross-examination at Bill Dicker's hands.

Joan was not at home when he arrived, and he amused himself by another inspection of Rex Walton's study. It had occurred to him that he had not very carefully examined the blotting-pad or the contents of the stationery rack. The blotting-pad consisted of a number of thick sheets of blotting-paper, held together at the corners by leather binders. The top sheet was spotless, and he wondered idly, as he looked at the table, whether Rex had followed the practice of most people who did a lot of writing and "worked down" the sheets which had been covered with impressions. He stripped off one of the corner pieces and ran the edge of the paper along his nail. Evidently Rex was of that economical turn of mind, for the three bottom pages were discoloured and covered with writing and blot marks. He pulled them out, without hoping that here he would discover anything which would enable him to get closer to the mystery of Walton's disappearance.

On the first sheet he was able to decipher, with the aid of a mirror over the mantelpiece, a number of business letters—one in particular interested him; it was a letter in which Walton instructed his bank manager to sell a large block of stock which he held. The date was indecipherable, but Jimmy had seen the letter's original and knew to a day when it had been written. This gave him a line, because it showed him exactly the period the pad had been in use. He was still examining the blotting-paper when Joan returned. So absorbed was he that he did not see her, and she was standing, with a quiet smile, in the doorway when she made her presence known.

"I forgot all about Rex's blotting-paper," she said. "I suppose there's nothing there, is there, Jimmy?"

"Nothing except a few letters," said Jimmy, looking up, "and——" He paused and looked more closely at the scattered impressions he was now examining. "That looks like a receipt to me."

She came to him and looked over at his shoulder.

"Received from Mr. Rex Walton the sum of——"

"It might be almost anything," she said. "There's an enormous number of noughts in it."

Underneath were two lines which were almost impossible to read.

"I can make out 'tody,'" said Jimmy. "Did Rex have a receipt book?"

She nodded.

"He was very methodical in business matters. I know he had a book of blanks, because I used to joke about them. In fact, he never gave me any money at all that I did not give a receipt for. It was irritating at first, when I came back from college, but then I began to see how Rex's mind worked, and after that it became fun. I'll find the book for you."

It was not in the study. She had taken it away, with other of Rex's intimate papers, to her own room. Presently she came back with the book in her hand—a very commonplace, oblong receipt book, such as can be purchased at any stationer's for a few shillings.

It was half empty. Jimmy turned the counterfoils one by one. He had only turned two when he came to one that was not written upon, except for some pencilled figures, a glance at which revealed to Jimmy the fact that they represented the sum which had disappeared in such extraordinary fashion. He looked at the blotting-paper again, hoping to find a name, and after careful inspection he came to the conclusion that, when the blank was made out, the person who gave the receipt was not in the room. Rex Walton must have taken it with him somewhere, and there it must have been signed, and—what became of it ?

With a gasp Jimmy remembered the blue envelope ! That was one of the things in the blue envelope !

CHAPTER XVII

THAT, and something else — the marriage certificate. To whom had the money gone? To this mysterious May Liddiart? But that again was beyond possibility. Rex would never trust a woman with so much money. He was a type which is often described as old-fashioned. He had no faith in woman's ability, and was something of a reactionary in the matter of woman's preoccupations. He never employed a girl in his offices, and he eyed with disgust the modern woman's desire for equality of opportunity. Rex believed that a woman's place was her home, and had frequently expressed to Jimmy his unoriginal views on the subject.

"What is the trouble?" asked Joan, seeing his serious face. "Have you found anything fresh?"

"Yes, I have found something extraordinary," said Jimmy. "Sit down, Joan. Forgive me for ordering you about in your own house. A new problem has arisen. Do you know a girl named May Liddiart?"

Joan shook her head.

"Do you know whether Rex knew her?"

"No, I'm sure he didn't. He would have mentioned her to me," said Joan. "He always talked about the girls he had met. Poor old Rex! He was very limited in his knowledge of women. Who is May Liddiart ? "

" You remember the day I met you in the Tower ? Can you recall what happened after that ? "

Joan wrinkled her brows in an effort of memory.

" Yes, we came home and had lunch, and then Rex went out at about half-past two. He was rather nervous and a little irritable, I remember, though I don't know whether that interests you."

" It interests me very much," said Jimmy. " What time did he return ? "

There was a pause.

" About five o'clock. It may have been soon after. He told me he'd been to see Dora, and he was very nervous and distrait. Why, Jimmy, what is it ? "

" I have reason to believe—indeed, I know—that Rex was married to a girl named May Liddiart on that afternoon," said Jimmy quietly, and she sprang to her feet with a gasp.

" Married to May Liddiart ! " she said incredulously. " Who is May Liddiart ? "

" That is what I want to know," said Jimmy.

" But it is impossible—absolutely impossible ! Rex wouldn't do such a thing. He was engaged to Dora. Do you imagine for a moment that he would marry another woman the day before—that he would commit bigamy ? " she asked hotly. " Who has said this ? "

" Unfortunately I have documentary proof," said Jimmy. " He was married at the Chelsea Register Office by the assistant registrar. The only question is, who was the girl ? "

He told her what he had discovered amongst the ashes in the drawer of Walton's desk, and how he had confirmed the scrap of information he had obtained from deciphering one of the fragments Joan sat down with a helpless gesture.

"I give it up, Jimmy. I feel like Alice in Wonderland. Most impossible things are happening, but I really cannot at a minute's notice scrap my ideas of Rex."

"That is exactly how I feel," said Jimmy. "Now, the point is, Joan, how far is this to go?"

"You mean, should Dora be told?"

He nodded.

"I don't know . . . I think so . . . but I'm not competent to give sane advice. Poor Dora! Isn't it terrible? I shan't dare to face her. Isn't there a chance of it being somebody else looking like Rex and using his name?"

Jimmy shook his head.

"That possibility has been discussed by Dicker and me, and we both agree that it is unlikely. The taximan who picked him up at Cadogan Square knew him by sight, had driven him before—his man 'stands' in that district. And he was emphatic that it was Rex. And the clerk at the registrar's office also knew him, because he had been in a few days before to get the special licence. The actual day of the wedding was not fixed until the morning it occurred. Shall we tell Dora?"

The girl thought for a long time before she answered.

"Yes, I think we must," she said. "It is fairest that she should know everything and that, if she had any grief for Rex, the knowledge of his—oh, it was monstrous of him, Jimmy; it was wicked!"

Jimmy saw, to his alarm, that she was on the verge of tears, and tried to comfort her, feeling more awkward than he had ever felt before.

"Will you tell her or shall I?"

"I think you had better," she said after another moment of consideration. "I shan't dare to see her."

Jimmy left Cadogan Square with the uncomfortable sensation of one who is about to undergo a very trying ordeal, and when he learnt at Portland Place that Dora was not at home he breathed a sigh of relief.

Should he write to her? He decided that was a cowardly way, and left word with the new butler which the energetic Mr. Coleman had procured that he would return just before dinner.

Something in the man's face was familiar and he turned back.

"I know your face," he said, and the man smiled.

He was young for a butler, thought Jimmy, and he had seen him before.

"I'm Bennett, sir," he said, and Jimmy remembered.

"The chauffeur—of course! You've been promoted?"

Bennett smiled again.

"Yes, sir, it's a lift up for me. I suppose you didn't find the burglar, sir?"

"Which one?" asked Jimmy, with an inward smile at the thought that the only burglary that counted in Bennett's mind was that in which he had played a defensive part.

The whole thing was getting on Jimmy's nerves, he decided as he walked home, and had Rex been a stranger he would gladly have handed the case to some other officer for investigation. That there was some personal danger to himself, he had realised before Parker's drugged coffee got to work—long before The Digger had taken a pot shot at him and blistered the paint of an unoffending lamp-post.

Kupie was fighting for his life, fighting like one who was in a corner ; and this fact was an additional cause of wonder to Jimmy, because it seemed that Kupie held so strong a hand that he had little to fear from police investigation. His trail was covered. The cleverest of police officers could get no nearer to him than the identified Parker as the chief of this evil association. It is an axiom in police circles that when a man is known, he is caught, and that no known criminal has ever escaped from justice. Sooner or later Parker would be found ; and being found—what ?

There was a lingering doubt at the back of Jimmy's mind as to whether the arrest of Parker would automatically put an end to Kupie's activities.

There was a bulky package awaiting Jimmy when he called in at his flat, and written in a hand which was strange to him. He tore open the envelope and took out a thick wad of letters. A glance at the address told him that his communicant was Nippy Knowles.

> *Dear Mr. Sepping* (he read), *I've never been a man who went out of his way to help a " busy," so I don't want any bouquets for the little job I managed for you the other day. You're a lucky fellow to escape. They tell me that The Digger is looking for you, so watch out ! In regard to a certain party about whom I have told you, I came across two or three of her letters the other day, and I ask you, as a student of human nature, if you would think a girl who could write as this young lady wrote to me, would put a double on me as she did. Women I*

regard as being outside the pale of civilisation. Hoping you are well, Yours truly, Nippy.

There was a postscript:

Anything I can ever do for you I'll be happy to do, because you're a gentleman, and that's more than you can say about the majority of people at Scotland Yard. They're only happy when they're twisting fellows who have helped them.

Jimmy passed this libel upon the active, intelligent officers of Scotland Yard with a smile, and dropped the letters into a drawer of his desk for perusal at some other time. He was not in the mood to study the amorous epistles of servant girls.

At seven o'clock that night he rang the bell at Portland Place and was admitted to Dora's presence. She was alone in the drawing-room and came towards him with outstretched hands.

"Jimmy, you have news!" she said, and his heart sank.

"Yes, I have news, Dora," he answered a little huskily. "But I'm afraid it is not pleasant news."

"Has anything happened to Rex?" she asked, her eyes wide open.

"No, not exactly. Dora, do you know a girl named May Liddiart?"

Her eyes never left his. He expected her to deny all knowledge of May Liddiart, this mystery girl. Instead, to his amazement, she answered:

"Yes. Why? Do you mean about the marriage?"

He could only stare at her.

"Do—do you know?" he stammered.

"That Rex was married to May Liddiart at

Chelsea on the day before he disappeared? Yes, I know."

She was so calm that he could hardly believe his ears.

"Who is she?" he gasped.

"I am May Liddiart," said Dora. "Dora May Liddiart Coleman—or Dora Walton. Rex is my husband."

CHAPTER XVIII

"I WONDERED if you would find that out," she said, Jimmy's mind was incapable of receiving the news.

"You are May Liddiart—you are—you are Rex's wife, you're Dora Walton ?" he asked almost incoherently.

She nodded.

"Sit down, Jimmy. I ought to have told you all this before, but I was afraid of father knowing," she said. "Rex was very worried about these stupid letters he had received, and he feared that something might happen before we were married. It got so on his mind that he asked me if I would advance the day of the wedding. I couldn't do that ; I knew exactly how father would rave—he is rather an autocrat," she said with a faint smile. "Then he suggested we should be married secretly in his own district, and that the marriage should be repeated on the following day, without anybody being the wiser. I told him that was impossible, because somebody might recognise me—and it would look rather queer in print, wouldn't it, Jimmy ?"

He nodded.

"So I compromised, very foolishly. I told him we would be married in assumed names. Of course, that would not invalidate the marriage, but when he agreed, he found that it was necessary that his own name should be given. So I went to the registrar's office the day we met you, and in the name of May Liddiart I became his wife. After the ceremony we walked in the park ; then I went home, and he went back to Cadogan Square. It was a mad thing to do, absolutely unreasonable. But Rex was afraid that—he would lose me. He thought that something terrible would happen at the last moment. It was an obsession with him. Do you think I have been mad ? I know I have."

"Does your father know ?"

She shook her head.

"I dare not tell father. That is one of the trials ahead ! And really, father has no time to discuss anything except the enormous impropriety of Parker ! I really think that the shock of discovering that he had a real criminal in his house, serving in the capacity of butler, has almost worried father to death. It has had a greater effect than the war, and, thank heaven ! it has been a more prolific subject for discussion than Rex's disappearance. What do you think of me, Jimmy ?"

He squeezed her arm sympathetically.

"My dear girl, what else could you do ?" he asked. "I think Rex is a little mad on the subject of Kupie. But I wish you'd told me."

"What difference would it have made ?" she demanded, and Jimmy knew that she spoke truly "Does Joan know ? Of course you told her." There was a twinkle in her eye.

"Yes, I told Joan. She said she couldn't face you."

Dora laughed softly.

"I'll go back with you to Cadogan Square and tell her all about it. Poor Jimmy ! Even love affairs come to add to your perplexity !"

"Love affairs are my speciality," said Jimmy soberly; "even my crooked acquaintances lay their bleeding hearts at my feet," and he told her of Nippy and his false Julia.

For the second time that day Jimmy's mind was relieved. He could not quite fathom the mentality of his missing friend, but his action was not altogether inexplicable, though he must have realised, if he thought at all, that the first marriage would lead to endless complications.

To Joan the astonishing news was less of a shock than it had been to Jimmy.

"Thank heaven it's that!" she said with a long sigh. "My dear, you're an official Walton! How precious!"

She kissed the girl affectionately. Jimmy thought she kissed rather nicely.

Dora stayed to dinner. Now that the secret was out, there were many things she wanted to discuss.

"Of one thing I'm sure," said Joan when the meal was through and they were sitting in the softly-lighted drawing-room. "And it is that Rex went away because of this first marriage. At any rate, it was through you that he disappeared."

"Through me?" said Dora.

Joan nodded.

"I'm perfectly certain that Rex discovered some terrible danger threatened you and could only be averted by his going away as he did. Hasn't that struck you, Jimmy?"

"Nothing has struck me about this case except the infernal tangle of it," groaned Jimmy. "I'm prepared to believe that Rex had a beautiful motive, but there are moments when I wish he'd stayed, whatever was the consequence."

"You're a pig," said Joan reproachfully. "If it meant that Dora was in danger, aren't you glad he went?"

"Do you think he recognised Parker?" asked Dora suddenly. "I don't mean 'recognised,' but that he knew him for what he was? It has occurred to me that Parker might have known something about Rex."

"It has occurred to me," said Jimmy, "that he might have known something about you!"

Dora laughed.

"He must have been hunting through my school reports," she said. "The evil that I have done on earth is duly recorded by my very prim head mistress, and my biggest sin, as daddy will tell you, is that once on a time I indiscreetly mentioned that the City of Melbourne was raising a four and a half per cent. loan! Daddy hasn't forgiven me to this day, for the secrets of the Treasury are as the Book of Oth!"

They talked on, Jimmy, sitting in silence, revolving in his mind all the possibilities and all the wild improbabilities of Rex Walton's action. Once or twice he remembered the receipt, but he had little opportunity of putting his question, until Dora rose to go.

"Father is returning at half-past nine," she said. "If he finds that I'm out, he will probably telephone to the police."

"Dora," said Jim, "I am pretty certain that Rex paid away a large sum of money—nearly a million pounds. I've already told you, but as you are his wife it is necessary that you should have the fullest details."

"I know the money has disappeared," said the girl quietly.

"I've proof that a receipt was given for this sum," said Jimmy. "The impression was found on his blotting-pad."

"A receipt? Then you know to whom the money has gone?"

Jimmy shook his head.

"We don't know that, unfortunately. I think it is established that Rex did write out a receipt for the full sum, and that that receipt was signed and placed in a blue envelope in the drawer of his desk. Something else was in that envelope too—a chemical which had been introduced either in the form of a saturated letter or placed in some other form by some unknown person, and which practically destroyed the whole contents of that drawer except one tiny scrap, which scrap, by the way, led me to the discovery that he was married at Chelsea."

"You haven't been able to discover the receipt?" she asked thoughtfully. "Do you think that was in the drawer too?"

Jimmy nodded.

"It is very strange. But he never talked to me about his business affairs. It came as a great surprise to me to learn that he was practically penniless, though that doesn't trouble me a little bit, Joan," she said, turning to the girl. "I have an income of my own, and I never thought of Rex as a rich man. Do you think this dreadful Kupie has the money?"

"I think so," said Jimmy. "Though what inducement he could offer to a business man like Rex to part with that sum, heaven only knows! He never talked to you about the money at all?"

"Never," she replied, "except——" She hesitated. "He did tell me that he was giving me an allowance of five thousand, and the ante-nuptial contract which he signed two or three days before the marriage mentioned specific settlements. What they were I've forgotten, and I shan't know, because somebody has robbed Lawford Collett of that and other deeds Did you know ? "

Jimmy smiled.

" Oh, yes, I knew," he said.

" That wouldn't matter. I only want Rex," she said in a low voice. " They may have all the money —all his and all mine—all ! "

Jimmy took her back to the house and was grateful to learn that Mr. Coleman had not returned.

So one little mystery was dissolved in the most convincing manner. It remained now to discover Parker and make a general clean-up.

He returned to the block of buildings in which he lived, and walked slowly up the stairs to his flat. His key turned in the lock, but the door did not open and he pressed the bell. The flat, which was usually lit, was in darkness, as he saw through the passage, and no reply came. Albert was a good servant, wholly dependable, and certainly not the kind of man who would go out without permission.

His hand was raised to press the bell for the second time, when a voice whispered, seemingly from the ground :

" What's the matter with your shirt ? "

Jimmy stepped back a pace at this extraordinary question, for he recognised the voice of Albert and he was speaking through the slit of the letter-box.

" Open the door," he said sternly. " What the devil are you playing at ? " For the moment he thought Albert was drunk.

" What's the matter with your shirt ? " asked the voice doggedly.

Jimmy frowned. There was some reason for this question—an especial reason, because that morning he had discussed certain renovations of his wardrobe which were needed.

"It wants re-cuffing," he said.

He heard the bolt slip back and the door was opened.

"Shut the door, sir, quick."

Jimmy obeyed. Then a light was switched on and he saw Albert. The man was in his shirt and trousers and the shirt was black with blood. Round his head was a stained bandage, his face was pale, and in his hand was a large army revolver.

CHAPTER XIX

"WHAT on earth is the matter, Albert? Are you hurt?"

"Yes, I'm hurt," said Albert grimly. "In me feelings, sir, as well as me head!"

He led the way back to the sitting-room, and a scene of extraordinary confusion met Jimmy's eyes. His desk had been overturned, the drawers had been flung out and the floor was littered with papers.

"They did that after they'd coshed me," said Albert, glaring at the evidence of the intruders' disregard for order.

"Tell me what happened."

"About eight o'clock to-night, sir," said Albert, "somebody came to the door and knocked. It's funny that, though I ordinarily open the door to anybody who knocks, I kind of hesitated and asked who was there. I think it was the fact that the landing lights were out—I saw that through the fanlight—that made me suspicious. 'Open the door, you fool,' said a fellow outside. Thinking it was you, I opened the door and—cosh! I didn't feel it hit me. The first thing I remember was waking up on my bed and hearing the row they were making in your sitting-room."

"How many were there?"

"Two, sir," said Albert. "They were searching high and low for something, and Parker was cursing the other."

"Who?" asked Jimmy quickly.

"Parker—the fellow that used to be at Mr. Coleman's. I'm sure it was him, because I've been to Mr. Coleman's house several times and I recognised his voice. It made my head swim to sit up, but I managed to get off the bed as quietly as possible, and fumbled around the shelves for my revolver. They must have heard me, for, just as I got the gun, one of the men came to the doorway. There was no light in the passage and not enough from the sitting-room to see his face. He saw me, though. As I put up my gun, he snatched hold of the handle of the door and banged and locked it. I hammered at the door, but before I could kick it open they were gone."

Jimmy was looking round the room.

What was it they sought? There was nothing that could be of the least possible use to Kupie.

"They've written something on the desk, sir," said Albert.

Jimmy saw the grey notepaper. The note had been hurriedly scribbled in pencil and there was no doubt as to the authorship.

Keep out of this Walton case, and stay out,

the note ran.

It was signed with the inevitable *K.*

"So this is London," said Jimmy ironically as he looked upon the ruins. "Albert, you will go back to bed. I'll do all the tidying up that is necessary. But first let me see that wound of yours."

He untied the rough bandage and made an inspection of Albert's injury. It was more serious than he had thought, and in a quarter of an hour two surgeons were in the flat, stitching and dressing the wound. In the meantime, Jimmy had picked up his papers and arranged them in something like order. The scene which had met his eye was curiously reminiscent of the state in which he had found Lawford Collett's office. Had the burglars the same purpose in view? What was it? He reviewed mentally all his possessions that might be of interest to Parker, *alias* Kupie; and in the end he gave it up. So far as he could remember, no papers had been taken and certainly no other valuables were missing.

He sat down and lit a cigar. Kupie was in a panic! Never before had this mystery man worked with such crudeness. The bludgeoning of Albert, the enormous risk which such a procedure involved, the hasty search for documents—all this revealed fear; and with the knowledge of this fear, Jimmy felt on safer ground.

One of the surgeons came in presently.

"That man of yours has had a nasty crack," he said. "I'll have him moved to a nursing home if you wish, or I'll send in a nurse."

"Send a nurse," said Jimmy, "a male nurse for preference."

But no male nurses were available, they telephoned him, and then he remembered Nippy Knowles and his offer to help. It was a whimsical thought, for Nippy had none of the qualities which make for a nursing attendant. Nevertheless, Jimmy sent a messenger down to Lambeth, and at one o'clock in the morning Nippy arrived and, to Jimmy's surprise, seemed to regard the request which was made of him as not being unusual.

"They coshed him, did they?" he said

thoughtfully. "That's bad. Kupie, of course? Do you want me here to scare burglars?"

"Partly that," said Jimmy, "and partly because I need your expert advice."

"When a copper comes to one of the 'boys' for expert advice, it means he wants him to 'nose,' and that I'll never do," said Nippy. "I'll look after your man for you, and if you'll confine your desires to fried sausages I dare say I'll manage to make your breakfast. I'm an expert at fried sausages," he claimed modestly.

So Nippy became installed in Jimmy Sepping's flat—a proceeding which afforded Mr. William Dicker a great deal of amusement.

"I'm not out reforming criminals," confessed Jimmy, "but I like the little fellow, and I think, if I get to know him, I might be able to do something for him. Besides which, we'll get whispers. By whispers, I mean first-hand news of trouble which may be coming my way."

"Not from Kupie?" said Bill, but Jimmy nodded.

"Kupie is not an organisation, he's an employer. His little coups are extemporised, either on the spur of the moment or a few hours before they are brought off. Casey's gambling hell was, of course, a different proposition, because Kupie financed it. But outside of any establishment of that character, even if another exists, I do not think of Kupie as an organised force."

"Have you found what they wanted?"

Jimmy shook his head.

"The only thing I have which could possibly interest them—no, it wasn't that."

"What was it?" asked Dicker quickly.

Jimmy laughed.

"There was a bundle of amorous love-letters written to our friend Nippy in his callow days—they couldn't have been so very long ago, by the way, because he's only been on the crook for five or six years. But Nippy was anxious I should read them."

Bill Dicker grinned.

"Kupie was hardly likely to plug your servant and burgle your flat for the sake of getting material to blackmail Knowles," he said. "Are they missing?"

"I don't know," said Jimmy. "It never occurred to me until this moment that they were in the flat. I put them in one of the drawers of my desk; they are probably there still."

Jimmy tried to remember the character of the papers he had replaced. Every drawer had been emptied, and Jimmy had made some rough attempt to restore the scattered contents. Try as he did, he could not remember having handled Nippy's letters. It was a fantastic idea, but it so possessed him that he went straight back to his rooms and began another examination. Nippy was sitting with his patient when Jimmy called him.

"Knowles, there's something lost which I can't quite understand. You haven't by any chance seen those letters you sent to me?"

"Julia's?" asked Nippy in surprise. "What did you think of them?"

"I didn't read them," admitted Jimmy. "I was in such a tearing hurry that I put them in the drawer of my desk."

"Oh!" Nippy was obviously disappointed. "Well, you ought to read 'em, because they're classy! That girl could put more soul into three lines than any poet that's ever breathed the breath of life!"

"You haven't seen the packet?" interrupted Jimmy.

Nippy shook his head.

"No, Mr. Sepping, I haven't been in your room. If I had, I shouldn't take it without asking permission."

The detective again turned out the contents of the drawers and went over them thoroughly, but Nippy's package was not there.

"They couldn't have pinched them," said Nippy. "Probably they chucked 'em into the fire."

"Nothing was destroyed, so far as I can find out," said Jimmy, "But those letters are certainly not here."

Nippy scratched his chin thoughtfully.

"Oh, they're not there?" he repeated slowly. "Do you think the burglars took 'em?"

"I'm certain they did. I can't see how else they went," said Jimmy.

"Oh!" said the other abstractedly. He repeated: "So they're not there?"

Something in his tone made Jimmy look up.

"What do you think, Knowles?"

"There's only one thing to be thought, sir," said Nippy Knowles firmly, "and it is that Julia's in this business."

"In the Kupie business?" scoffed Jimmy, but the man was not jesting.

"She's a clever girl."

"But, my dear fellow, a servant girl doesn't organise a job like this."

"She wasn't an ordinary servant girl, I tell you," said Nippy. "She was class. If you'd read them letters, you'd have seen how class she was. That girl was marked out for big graft. I knew it then, and I've known it ever since, because

I've met grafters and seen what cheap skates they are."

"What was she like, your Julia?"

"I don't know," said the other vaguely. "She was very lovely, but you mightn't think her so. Lots of men tell me that they've got beautiful birds, but when I come to look at 'em they look like crows to me. Never trust any other man's judgment about a woman, Mr. Sepping, and never trust a woman anyway."

"Have you got her photograph?"

Nippy shook his head.

"Never had a photograph," he said, "and if I had, I wouldn't show it to you."

"Where was she employed?"

"That I can't tell you," said Nippy, "meaning no offence. My motto is: 'Thou shalt not garden-hop.'"

"That's a new one on me," said the puzzled Jimmy.

"In plain English: 'Thou shalt not copper.' I've never been a policeman and I'm too blasé to start now. If you find Julia in the ordinary course of business, you can find her. She's got her graft and I've got mine, and I've no business to put her away."

In this resolution he remained firm, and Jimmy knew the criminal classes well enough to know that this inflexible code of theirs would not be broken by the man. There is honour amongst thieves, amongst real thieves—men and women who do nothing but thieve and swindle for a living. It is only the amateur and the weakling who squeal.

"You met her somewhere in Sheffield," he began.

" Forget it," said Nippy with an expressive wave of his hand. " I was in Sheffield, certainly, but where I met this dame I wouldn't tell my mother. And listen, Mr. Sepping, if you go making inquiries round the country as to where and when and why a certain safe was opened on a Sunday afternoon and a servant girl disappeared, I'm going to quit, because you're betraying a confidence. And you'll get no nearer to finding out the truth. There are millions of pretty servant girls round Sheffield, anyway," he said, and added : " I know."

CHAPTER XX

HE considered the matter awhile from his own peculiar angle, and Jimmy, who thought the subject closed, was surprised when he went on :

" I've only got a cross-country line to their graft—Julia's, I mean. It was Haydn's crowd she ran with. You know Tod Haydn, or you're no copper."

Jimmy knew the redoubtable gunman, swindler and general larcenist by repute.

" That's as much as I'll tell you, except—how does Tod strike you as likely Kupie ? "

He had not struck Jimmy that way at all.

" I'll look him up," he said, and Nippy laughed softly.

" What will you look up ? " he asked. " Why, you haven't got anything to look up ! He's never been inside. A Tod Haydn once went down for five—you'll find his record all right, but it wasn't Tod. He owned up to being Tod because the gang found he was snouting* and they gave him the alternative of taking Tod's five—they thought it was going to be ten—or going bye-bye. And they'd have put him bye-bye, too, those boys. Murder was cream pie to Tod."

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* Informing.

"But how could anybody go down for Tod's offence—the police knew him?" asked Jim, and the other chuckled.

"There's a side of police life that's a sealed book to you, Sepping," he said, "which shows as you're honest, as I've suspected all along. Tod was pinched because the police *had* to go after him. He'd straightened 'em for years. But this time they had to get a Tod of some kind, so they got this fellow. He's as much like Tod as I'm like Niagara Falls. But they swore to him and he went down for five, and everybody was happy."

Jimmy did not argue. It was neither profitable nor wise to go deeply into the question of police integrity.

"Tod might be this Kupie," said the little burglar, nodding. "It's the graft that would appeal to him—he's a biggish fellow and a grand rehearser. When you're working with Tod you've got to be what you are. If your part is a parson, you've got to play it all the time, even in private. If Tod had a fellow disguised as a reverend and that fellow didn't say his prayers, even in private, and Tod got to know, why, he'd break his head in. If Tod's playing a boss part, he's 'sir.' If he's playing a groom's part, he touches his hat, even when him and the gang are in private. Once he had a fellow who was dressed up as a policeman—it was when he cleared, or was supposed to clear, the Western Bank. And because that fake copper looked intelligent, Tod kicked him from hell to Christmas."

Jimmy looked at the tale-teller, but Mr. Knowles's eye never even blinked.

It occurred to Jimmy later that possibly the burglars had taken the packet of letters from his flat, thinking they were of greater importance than they were, because they had been contained in the sealed envelope which Nippy had sent. It was not the sort of clue which he could follow, or one on the progress of which he could afford to spend public money, and he decided that the taking of Nippy's letters was one of the common varieties of error which burglars sometimes commit.

The only striking fact that had emerged from the burglary was that Parker was in London and active. Again the " hurry " call ran from station to station. Every likely haunt and hiding-place was searched from garret to cellar, and again without result.

He had an appointment to dine at Portland Place on the third night following the burglary, and he was the more anxious to keep it because he wanted to know whether Dora had broken the news of the marriage to her father, and what effect it had had upon that pompous light of the Treasury.

One glance at Mr. Coleman told him that, so far, he was blissfully ignorant of his daughter's indiscretion. He was almost jovial, and throughout the dinner related at great length a very boring recital of an interview he had had with his chief, and how that gentleman had been certain that Mr. Coleman had made a mistake in some obscure financial transaction, and how Mr. Coleman had convinced his superior that, so far from making a mistake, it had been the great man himself who was in fault; and what the chief had said to Mr. Coleman and Mr. Coleman had said to the chief. Throughout it all Jimmy nodded and agreed and exhibited polite amazement, without hearing more than two consecutive sentences.

The fourth member of the party was Lawford Collett; and when at last (this came towards the end of the meal) Mr. Coleman had finally enthroned himself as the supreme financial authority of the country, and had received the homage due to his brilliant genius, Jimmy, without discourtesy to his host, was able to turn his attention to more pressing matters.

" I hear we're brothers in misfortune, Sepping ? " said Lawford Collett.

" You mean the burglary ? " said Jimmy with a grin. " Yes, they treated me almost as badly as they did you. By the way, you found nothing else missing ? "

Collett shook his head.

" No, with the exception of Dora's marriage settlement, there was nothing."

Jimmy looked up at the girl, and she shook her head slightly. So she had not told even Collett. Apparently Collett did not observe her gesture, for he went on :

" It would be rather a serious business if you had been married, Dora, because the whole of your settlement would have been at stake. I have a copy, of course, but not the signed copy. What did they find in your house ? " asked Collett.

" Nothing at all, except a bundle of letters which did not belong to me, and the loss of which worried neither me nor their owner."

" Burglars, burglars, burglars ? " interrupted Mr. Coleman irritably. " I wish to goodness you people would find some other subject ! I suppose it is because sensationalism is rampant that otherwise well-balanced minds become morbid and introspective. One cannot go to any dinner table in London without the conversation turning to a discussion of crime ! "

" I am the culprit," said Jimmy. " Crime follows a policeman as surely as trade follows the flag, and we're all brothers in distress."

"Have they found that rascal Parker?" demanded Mr. Coleman, glowering at the detective.

"I'm afraid we haven't."

Mr. Coleman made a noise indicating his impatience.

"There was a time when I thought that our police force was the most competent in the world," he said bitterly. "There was a period when I imagined that an honest, law-abiding citizen could sleep safely in his bed, with the sure knowledge and confidence that his property and well-being were guarded by a staff of intelligent and knowledgeable police officers." He shook his head. "I am afraid I have reason to reconsider my opinion. First we have Walton's going, the burglar in this house; then we have the disappearance of Parker and the terrible attempt to poison you, Mr. Sepping—and that such a thing should have happened in my house is a matter I shall always regret. Then we have the burglary at Collett's office—I hope you have put all my papers in a strong-room of some kind, Collett? I must confess that my confidence in you weakened when I learnt the ease with which these rascals——"

"Your papers are in very safe custody," smiled Collett.

"And as to the efficiency of the police," said Jimmy, "you have to remember that we are dealing with a very remarkable type of criminal. If it had been a plain, everyday burglar who had broken into your flat or Collett's office or my humble apartment, we should have had him before a judge by now. But he isn't an ordinary burglar; he isn't an ordinary criminal, and the type of crime which he is committing is one which has few parallels."

"Humph!" said the sceptical Mr. Coleman.

Lawford Collett had to leave early, and as Mr.

Lowman had brought some work from the Treasury—a special work which no human eye saw but his—Jimmy had a few minutes alone with the girl.

"I haven't told him," she said before he could ask her the question. "I don't think much would be gained. Naturally, I shall have to tell him sooner or later, because he will want me to marry again, and he has already hinted."

"Perhaps he's found a bridegroom?" smiled Jimmy, and to his surprise she nodded.

"He wants me to marry Lowbrid," she said gravely. "I like Lowbrid a lot, but not enough to marry him. And I shall not marry him. Although daddy is a dear and I would do almost anything to please him, there are some things that I can't do. I don't want you to think that I dislike Lowbrid," she added quickly. "I like him very much. He is a man with real fine qualities, Jimmy. Only they aren't the qualities that are going to ensure my happiness."

Jimmy nodded gravely.

"You won't be able to marry, anyway, until you have proved the death of Rex Walton, or obtained an order from the court to assume that he is dead. And Rex is alive."

She looked at him.

"Do you know that?" she asked quickly. "Tell me, please, Jimmy."

"I ought to have told you before," he said, and related the story of his late encounter with Rex.

"You are sure it was he?"

"Quite sure. I would swear to it. Remember that I had my field glasses fixed on him."

She looked at him reproachfully.

"I wish you had told me that before," she said. "But I don't—I know you were acting for the best; you did not want to raise false hopes. And then, you didn't know that I was married and had a very special interest. You haven't seen him since?"

Jimmy shook his head.

"I wondered why all the advertisements had been returned from the newspapers," she said after a long cogitation. "Of course, when you saw that he was alive, that he had some reason for keeping away, you stopped advertising. Jimmy, can you explain it?"

"I can't," he confessed. "I've spent the greater part of the last two weeks looking for a sane, feasible explanation of Walton's disappearance. I thought I had it when I discovered that he'd married the day before you had fixed the ceremony. But even that explanation has gone."

She got up with a sigh and held out her hand.

"I think I'll go to bed, Jimmy. I'm a little . . ." She did not finish the sentence, and Jimmy saw Dora Coleman for the first time under the stress of emotion.

He had a few calls to make and was glad to leave early. One was at a dance club, where members of society congregated and danced till the small hours. He found the pretty club-room already packed, and the dancing space uncomfortably crowded. It was some time before he found the man he sought. This was a young, good-looking man about town, faultlessly dressed, who at the sight of the detective rose from the table where he was entertaining a small party and hurried out into the lobby to where Jimmy had retired.

"I got your message, Mr. Sepping, and I've made inquiries, but none of the girls who are working in London is called Julia—not even as a nickname. There is only one, she is in the cocaine business, and she's forty if she is a day. Besides, as it happens, she is in jail just now."

"Have any of the light-fingered ladies heard of a provincial hook called Julia?"

The other man shook his head. He was known as Folder, and was supposed by the underworld to be a man of some influence and possessed of a little property. By those who were not of the underworld, and who saw him at close quarters, he was generally regarded as a smart and clever crook. He was, in fact, a sergeant of the Criminal Investigation Bureau, though very few people were aware of this, for he never appeared at Scotland Yard in any circumstances, and the divisional police knew him not, except as a perfectly suspicious character.

Folder was a liaison officer between the crook and the police. Through him passed many delicate negotiations. He engineered conferences attended by hunter and quarry, conferences which frequently resulted in stolen property being restored to its rightful owner.

Jimmy took a cab from the club, and arrived home to find Nippy Knowles and Albert playing dominoes. He did a little work and went to bed. At three o'clock he was called to the telephone by a scantily-attired Nippy. To his alarm, he heard Dora's voice.

"Is that you, Jimmy? Daddy has just been called up by Lawford's servant."

"What has happened?" asked Jimmy quickly.

"He hasn't been home." Dora Coleman's voice betrayed her agitation.

"He hasn't been home? Is that remarkable?"

"It has never happened before, the servant says. Lawford had to leave by an early train this morning for the country and told his servant he should be in at ten o'clock. He told me, too, before he left Portland Place. I'm so sorry to worry you, Jimmy, but would you——"

"Surely," said the detective, and hung up the receiver.

His first inquiry went to the Yard and was of a comprehensive nature. In half an hour the report came back. Lawford Collett had not been traced in any police station or to any hospital. He had passed beyond human ken, as Rex Walton had passed, and his valet, and Parker.

CHAPTER XXI

LAWFORD COLLETT seldom, if ever, hired a taxicab. It was his boast that he walked twelve miles a day and if, in the course of his professional duties, he did not cover that space, he put in an extra two hours walking in the evenings. He had very nearly walked his allotted mileage by the night he came out of Mr. Coleman's house and walked at his leisure through Langham Place into Oxford Street, but in any circumstances he would not have ridden.

The thoroughfare was crowded, for the night was yet early, and he turned into Hanover Square, where the sidewalks were empty. Crossing the square, he came into a quiet street which ran parallel with Oxford Street and would lead him into Park Lane.

He strolled along at his leisure, hands in his pockets, a cigarette-holder clenched between his teeth, and resisted the temptation to call in at his club, remembering that he had to leave town at an early hour in the morning.

He came at last to a part of the street which was practically deserted, and then, looking over his shoulder, he saw that a big car was slowly following him, keeping close to the kerb. He thought that it was a chauffeur waiting for somebody in one of the houses—the car of a doctor, perhaps. It overtook him gradually, and he was level with the door of the machine when it was thrown open and a man sprang on to the sidewalk.

The spot was admirably chosen ; it was exactly midway between two street standards, and even if Collett had been sufficiently intrigued to look, he could not have seen the stranger's face, shaded as it was by the broad-brimmed hat he wore.

He stepped back with a word of apology, thinking that the man was going into the house on the left. Instead, the stranger turned, and something hard was pressed against Collett's waistcoat.

" Get in that car, or I'll shoot," said the new-comer in a low voice.

There was something in his assailant's tone which prohibited discussion. Lawford Collett obeyed. Immediately the man jumped in after him, the door was slammed, and the car quickened its speed.

The interior was in complete darkness. All the windows were covered by some material through which not even the electric street-lamps penetrated.

" I won't ask you what you mean by this outrage," said Collett, " though it seems to me to be a little futile. Where are you taking me ? "

" You'll find out," said his captor, who had apparently taken the bucket seat immediately opposite his prisoner.

Collett felt carefully for the windows ; as he guessed, they were shuttered and immovable. As if hearing or guessing the movement, his captor said :

" Don't try any monkey tricks. If you do, you'll be sorry."

It was not an educated voice, Collett decided, but it was disguised. Suddenly he heard a familiar boom, and it was close at hand. They were passing the Houses of Parliament, and it was the familiar note of Big Ben that he had heard. Crossing the river, probably. He felt the upward climb of the car, and was certain. They were running over Westminster Bridge.

For half an hour the car sped on, neither prisoner nor custodian speaking a word. And then Collett asked :

" Can I smoke ? "

" Wait," said the other man. He heard a scratch, saw a spark fly, and the dull red glow of a tinder showed in the darkness. " Light your cigarette from this. Don't strike matches, though you wouldn't see my face if you did."

Collett smoked cigarette after cigarette, lighting one from the butt of the other. He looked at the illuminated dial of his wrist-watch ; it was half-past eleven. They had been an hour on their journey.

" Is it far ? " he asked.

" Another two hours," was the laconic reply, and the lawyer settled himself back in the corner of the car to think.

He was not easily frightened, but this long and tiring journey began to get on his nerves. What lay at the end of it, he wondered. He could only guess the direction the car was taking. If they were going south, they would sooner or later come to the sea. He put a question to the man, but received no satisfaction. The watch showed a quarter past one when the car slowed and stopped.

" Don't move," warned the figure in the darkness. " I am going to blindfold you."

' Is all this tomfoolery necessary ? " asked Collett.

" Very," was the brief reply, and the lawyer submitted to a thick silk bandage being wrapped about his eyes.

The door opened, and the fresh air, after three hours in that smoky atmosphere, seemed like a draught of champagne. The man and the chauffeur took one arm each and guided him to the ground.

" We are descending some steps," said the captor. " Go carefully."

He counted seven steps and then heard the lap of water near at hand. There was a sound of rowlocks and the bumping of a boat as it touched the stairs on which they stood.

" Step carefully," said somebody, and he put his foot into the centre of a swaying boat.

They guided him to the stern, and presently he heard the splash of oars. The water was calm ; he remembered how still a night it was, and was very glad because his journey was by no means completed. Half an hour's rowing, and suddenly the oars were shipped. Somebody helped him to his feet, up a ladder and on to a firmer foundation. There was a whispered colloquy, and then the man who had brought him from London led him along what he guessed was a deck, down a narrow hatchway and along a passage as narrow. Then the bandage was stripped from his eyes.

He was standing in what appeared to him to be the broad saloon of a ship. The low roof was studded with shaded lamps ; the furnishing was of the most luxurious character, the walls being panelled in expensive wood, the portholes draped with silk curtains, and under his feet a heavy blue carpet. At the farther end was an ornate fire-place with a silver grate, and this was packed with flowers that filled the saloon with a faint fragrance.

Lawford gazed in amazement. He was on a private yacht, and yet it must have been an extraordinary yacht to have a saloon of this size. He looked round to his warder, but the man had spoken the truth when he said that his face was invisible He was masked to the chin.

" May I ask," said Collett sardonically, "whose guest I have the honour to be ? "

" Call him Kupie," sneered the other, and at that moment the door at the farther end of the saloon opened and a man came through. He was in evening dress, and he made no attempt to disguise himself.

Lawford Collett took a step forward and stared at the new-comer.

" You ! " he croaked. " You ! "

The man by the fire-place smiled crookedly.

" A little surprise for you, Collett, eh ? " he said.

Only his lips smiled, and in those hard, cold eyes Collett read his doom.

CHAPTER XXII

JIM brought the latest news to Portland Place. "Lawford was seen at Wilton Street ten minutes after he left this house," he said. "A policeman recognised him as he passed. The only clue they have as to the manner of his disappearance is the appearance in Wilton Street of a large car, which the policeman also noticed, and the number of which we've got, though I very much doubt whether it is its real number. The car passed down on the same side of the street as Lawford was walking and was seen again by an officer at the Park Lane end, going at a good speed towards Hyde Park Corner. After that all trace of it is lost."

"Do you suggest," asked Mr. Coleman awfully "that my legal adviser has been spirited away?"

Jimmy nodded.

"There can't be any doubt at all about that, Mr. Coleman," he said quietly.

"It's disgraceful!" spluttered Coleman, his face going purple. "Disgraceful! This, of course, is Kupie's work! I hate to use the word, but that is the villain. Why, Lawford may be dead!"

Jimmy did not agree with him, but neither did he disagree. It was unsafe to prophesy what move Kupie would make next, or what would be the end of any adventure in which he engaged himself. The puzzle to Jimmy was the seeming uselessness, the futility of the many outrages which had been committed during the past few weeks. The whole thing was so purposeless. The disappearance of Collett was no less futile than the disappearance of Rex Walton. The burglary at his flat, the absurd attempt at Portland Place, the equally stupid burglary at Lawford Collett's. If he could see obvious and apparent profit behind these crimes, there would be some clue at least to the mentality and the objective of this sinister force But there was no reason, no intelligence, no cause, nothing that any intelligent man could take hold of and unravel.

Dora had not slept that night, and again she showed in her face evidence of her mental suffering.

" Her nerve is going," he thought, and felt sorry for her. He was always being sorry for Dora. Lawford was only a friend, but he was a very close friend of the family ; and this new trouble, on top of the other, had shaken her.

The day passed without any fresh news of Collett coming to hand. At ten o'clock that night the telephones of Scotland Yard became suddenly active. From every quarter of the country people were calling to police head-quarters with a remarkable story. Jim was in his office when the reports began to arrive and an assistant brought it to him.

" There's an amateur wireless operator in Kent, who says he has taken this message," he said. He laid a slip of paper down before his chief and Jimmy read :

I am Lawford Collett. I am a prisoner on an unknown ship . . .

There it ended. There were three thousand listeners-in who called up Scotland Yard in the course of the next hour. They had all conveyed the same message. The Admiralty had heard it; two ships on the East Coast relayed the message; a liner outward-bound to New York picked it up and sent it back again. The story of Lawford Collett's disappearance was public property; it had been prominently displayed in every newspaper that morning. But all the messages were the same: "I am Lawford Collett. I am a prisoner on an unknown ship." It had been telephoned and had broken off at the word "ship." Some of the operators said they heard a cry following the word. Others, that they had distinctly heard another voice, though a little fainter, say "Stop him!" This latter story came from three reliable sources.

"On a ship!" said Bill Dicker when he was told. "That sounds queer. Kupie's head-quarters can't be on a ship—if it *is* Kupie. Unless he has thrown in his hand and is departing for other climes. Do you think it is a hoax?"

Jimmy shook his head.

"Collett has a slight lisp and several of the listeners-in heard this distinctly. I don't think there's any question, it was Collett all right. I've sent a radio broadcast, asking people who have directional wireless to give me the approximate direction of the sound, and to report any further messages that come."

But, though there were thousands of amateurs who listened all night, the voice of Lawford Collett did not come again to them. And for an excellent reason: he was sitting in a dark, bare cabin, barred and bolted, and about his two ankles was a chain which was fastened to the oaken deck.

That night there was a listener-in of a different kind, who knew nothing of wireless messages. In a small room on the top floor of a house in Stanley

Street two men were sitting at an uncovered table, playing euchre. The smaller of the two had a pair of telephone receivers clamped to his head, attached by a flex to a ready-made switchboard that stood in the corner behind him. The second was a stockily built man of middle age, with an unpleasant, grey face, which a two days' growth of beard did not improve.

Presently he put his cards down, and, going to a cupboard, took out a whisky bottle, a siphon and a glass, and poured himself a liberal portion. The little man with the receivers on his ears looked a little wistfully as the contents of the glass disappeared, and then glanced at his watch.

"I think she must have gone away," he said irritably. "There hasn't been a call through since this afternoon. You don't think she has discovered the cut-in, do you?" he asked a little anxiously.

His companion shook his head.

"Why should she?" he asked contemptuously.

He walked over to the untidy bed in one corner of the room and punched the pillow.

"I wish I was you; I hate this night work. And it is foolishness, too, because nothing's likely to happen in the night," complained the man with the telephone receivers.

"You'd better tell Parker that," said the other significantly. "And anyway, what are you squealing about? I've had sixteen hours of it. You'll get eight. And——"

A gesture from his companion stopped him. The man at the table was listening intently. Presently he reached for a pencil.

"She's here," he whispered, putting his hand over the ebonite receiver that hung near to his mouth.

The stocky man held his breath, trying to decipher the writing on the pad as his companion wrote. He paused now and again, his pencil uplifted, only to resume his shorthand scrawl. After five minutes he took the instruments from his ears and laid them down with a sigh of relief.

" Was it the girl ? " asked his interested companion.

" No, it was Sepping. He was telling her that they've had news from Collett—an interrupted wireless."

They looked at one another.

" Put your headpiece on again," said the other urgently. " She may call him."

The operator shook his head.

" No chance of that. He said good night and told her that he was going to the Yard and under any circumstances wouldn't call her till the morning."

The stocky man stretched himself.

" I'll be glad when this thing's through," he growled. " It's no joke being cooped up in this rotten hole."

" We wouldn't be cooped up if you'd finished it, Digger," said the other significantly. " What did Parker say ? "

" I haven't spoken to him," said the Digger shortly. " I'm glad too I didn't get Sepping—they'd have been a little more hot after me if I had. I must say," he admitted, " that Parker's organisation was better than I dreamt of. I thought after I'd shot that I'd never get away, but it was as easy as shelling peas."

The listener-in sighed and refixed his earpieces, and as he did so the Digger saw the man start. There was no need for his signal to keep silent. The strained look on his face emphasised the importance of the message which was coming through. Only once did he scribble a few lines on the pad. For a quarter of an hour neither spoke, and then the earpieces came off again.

"It was the girl," he said.

"What did she say?"

"She was talking to somebody at the Yard and she told him that somebody was listening-in again, and he said he knew——"

Neither of the men heard the stealthy step on the stair, for the silent intruder wore felt overshoes. The first intimation that all was not well came when with a thunderous crash the door burst open. A man stood in the doorway, in his hand a long-barrelled automatic.

"Hands up!" he said. "And I'm speaking to you in particular, Digger. Reach for your gun, and you'll go to a hotter city than Brisbane."

It was Jimmy Sepping.

CHAPTER XXIII

THEY hurried their prisoners to the nearest police station, leaving an officer in charge of the apparatus; and on the way Jimmy condescended to offer a little information.

"We've had that house under observation for two days, Digger. And when you opened the window yesterday morning you were recognised, at a range of two thousand yards, by a man with a telescope. Incidentally, he could have shot you, but we need not go into the grisly possibilities."

"You've got nothing on me," said the Digger. "I didn't tap the wire. Cully is a friend of mine and I happened to call on him—how did you know where the 'tap' was, anyway?"

"There's a queer little scientific instrument, the working of which I will not attempt to explain to you," said Jimmy, "but it detects a cut-in within a hundred yards. To-night we had two calls put through to make absolutely sure, and another call should be coming through somewhere about now."

"It's come," snarled the other. "You can't convict me of anything."

"I am many things, but not a jury," said Jimmy cheerfully. "And amongst other accomplishments, I am a prophet, and I think you're going down for ten years. There is one chance for you, Digger, and that is to squeak."

" Make it fifty years and then I won't squeak," said the Digger loudly, and Jimmy chuckled.

" That's the tone I like to hear! It is a sure and certain preliminary to a squeal. Think it over," he said, just before the door of the cell clanged upon the gunman.

In the morning the Digger, in a chastened frame of mind, was prepared to tell all he knew. Unfortunately, it was very little, though he supplied a piece of information which confirmed all Nippy Knowles's suspicions.

" I am not in this Kupie stunt," he said. " ' Black ' is not my graft. Parker is the fellow that put me on to it. He told me that he was working a ramp that would bring in big money. He was working as a butler, so he said, and he got to hear certain things through his boss being in the Government. I asked him if it was ' black ' and he said no, but something better. All he wanted me for was to do a bit of minding."

" Whom were you to mind ? " asked Jimmy.

" You were one, and this girl of yours was another."

" A little less of ' this girl of yours ' would be appreciated," said Jimmy sharply.

" How do I know who she is ? " grumbled the Digger. " I had to mind her, and I've been minding her for two months."

" In other words, you've been watching her ? "

" That's right."

" And her brother ? "

" No, Parker said nothing about her brother. Then about a fortnight ago I was told off to mind *you*. They said they'd tried to straighten you, but it hadn't got past, and that you were a dangerous man. They'd got Miller absolutely straight, so they weren't afraid of him whilst he was in charge of the case. My! They were scared when they knew you had taken it! It was about this time that I got orders, with a friend of mine, to watch Walton's house in Cadogan Square and shoot him on sight if he appeared. They gave me a monkey down—that's five hundred pounds——"

"You needn't translate," said Jimmy. "Go on."

"And there was always a car to get us away if any trouble arose. We were getting five thousand for a kill, and that's a lot of money. Not that I ever intended killing you, Mr. Sepping," he added hastily, and the sceptical Jimmy smiled.

"You needn't laugh," said the Digger earnestly; "'boob' up to a point I don't mind."

"By 'boob' you mean prison, of course?"

"What else?" asked the other impatiently. "I don't mind it, though I don't, as you might say, desire it. But not having any particular wish to meet your Mr. Ellis at eight o'clock on a cold morning, there was going to be no killing if I could help it. It was my fear that made me miss you. If you doubt my word, give me a gun and a target and I'll show you how I can hit bull centre eleven times out of twelve—and quick firing at that."

"You saw Parker, then? How often?"

"I saw him three or four times," said the Digger.

"Did he tell you that he was working the ramp?"

The Digger nodded.

"He's the big man in charge, there's no doubt about it. I don't know anybody else," he said.

"When did you see him last?"

"Yesterday," was the reply. "I met him in Tidal Basin yesterday evening. I don't know where he's hiding, so you can save yourself the trouble of asking. All I know is that he's out for blood, and he is not so much worried about the rope as I am."

"That's just where you're wrong," said Jimmy quietly. "Parker is a scared man."

"Well, he didn't seem so to me. He seemed a pretty steady young fellow——"

"Young fellow?" repeated Jimmy in amazement. "What do you mean? Parker is nearly sixty!"

The Digger's look of astonishment could not have been assumed.

"Sixty?" he said incredulously. "What are you talking about, Mr. Sepping? I don't suppose he's a day over thirty."

For a moment Jimmy was dumbfounded. Could it be possible that Parker was in reality a young man who had effectively disguised himself as somebody twice his age? Mentally he recalled the man, feature by feature, and in the end he was perfectly satisfied that there could have been no disguise. Besides, the prison record left no doubt as to his age.

"Parker is nearly sixty," he said. "Whoever you saw, it was not he. How did you first become acquainted with him?"

"Through some of the boys," said the Digger. "I don't know the crook crowd in London; I'm comparatively a stranger to town. Somebody told me that a man wanted a job done, and it was arranged that I met him in the city one night. And the fellow I saw was certainly not old. He had the voice of a gentleman too He did not tell me that he was in Mr. Coleman's service; I only learnt that when Parker disappeared. But he certainly told me his name was Parker."

"Who is the telephone operator we took?" asked Jimmy, turning to another subject.

"He's a fellow who was in the Post Office and was turned out for working a race-track swindle," said the gunman. "He's a nothing, just a cheap crook who was useful. I found him."

"Congratulations!" said Jimmy ironically.

CHAPTER XXIV

JIMMY thought, as he walked home, that he was as far from the solution of the mystery as ever. Indeed, the veil behind which Kupie was hiding had been thickened by yet another impenetrable curtain. The gunman's story was bewildering, but he had evidently told the truth. Who was this man of thirty, with a voice like a gentleman? Rex? He dismissed the idea as being too absurd to consider.

Tod Haydn?

This sounded much more like the man. Tod was unknown to the Digger, though he remembered having heard of him and his exploits.

There was the barest possibility, however, that some record of the man existed at Scotland Yard. But Tod had never been convicted, he found—had never even been in the hands of the police; so there were neither photographs nor finger-prints by which he might be identified.

In some respects this new information tallied with his knowledge of Parker. Dora had told him that, when the burglar had broken into the house in Portland Place, Parker had been nervous to the point of panic. He himself had noticed, when he arrived, that the butler was very white and that his hand was shaking. And yet Parker, with the greatest calmness and sang-froid, had doped him and carried him to the gambling house. It was difficult indeed to reconcile the two phases of the man's nature.

A brief note, dispatched by special messenger, brought Mr. Coleman to his office, and that fussy official arrived with remarkable promptitude.

" I am afraid, my dear Sepping," he said somewhat testily, " that I cannot tell you any more about Parker than I have already told you. And, really, if you don't mind my saying so, it is a little inconsiderate to bring a gentleman from important public work in order to answer questions of this character. I realise that, in the execution of your duty, it is necessary that you should put many people to inconvenience. But surely, an official—and, if I may say so, with all modesty, an important official—of State should not be subjected to that kind of annoyance."

" I'm extremely sorry, Mr. Coleman," said Jimmy penitently, " but Parker has got so completely on my nerves——"

" He has been on my nerves, but fortunately I have the strength of mind to dismiss the more unpleasant problems and circumstances which would have overwhelmed a lesser man," said Mr. Coleman modestly. " Otherwise, since this unfortunate occurrence, my life would have been a perfect inferno. The chief result has been that my private life, which should be sacred to all save the more Radical and revolutionary journals in their morbid hunt for sensation, has been exposed to Tom, Dick and even to Harry. Surely, Captain Sepping, you can continue your investigations without any further encroachment on my time? As to Parker"—he hesitated—" I have told you nearly all I know. He came to me with a most excellent character, and he was a servant whom

I trusted." His face screwed up in a grimace of pain. "When I think I even allowed him to have the key of the silver chest, I am appalled! The man was a hypocrite, a humbug, a liar, a swindler and a thief."

"He was all those," agreed Jimmy with a faint smile. "But what I want to know, Mr. Coleman, is this: are you satisfied in your mind that Parker was a man of the age he pretended to be?"

Mr. Coleman frowned.

"I don't quite follow you. Do you mean, was he disguised in any way? If you do, I should reply, certainly not. I pride myself upon my knowledge of mankind and my excellent memory. And believe me, Mr. Sepping, I am not the kind of man who would be fooled. It was absolutely impossible that Parker could have been disguised, except, though, he was a thief disguised as a respectable butler. I have sent Dora away into the country—or rather I am sending her away this afternoon," he went off at a tangent. "This business has so got on the poor child's mind that I feared a nervous breakdown. What makes matters more awkward is the fact that I cannot secure the right kind of chauffeur, to replace Bennett, whom I have promoted to Parker's position. And a capital fellow he is. Any other butler would have objected very strongly to reverting to his old position, even for a day."

He looked at his watch.

"I really must go now, my dear Sepping. Will you dine with me to-night, and I will talk the matter over with you? I can't offer you the hospitality of my house, with Dora away and my domestic staff reduced, as it will be by the absence of Bennett. Will you dine at the 'Splendide'? And then perhaps things will occur to me which I have very naturally overlooked in the stress of my governmental duties —I shall not dress, by the way."

Jimmy had no wish to dine alone with Mr. Coleman. The pomposity and selfishness of the man, amusing at first, had become a little irritating. To this dry-as-dust servant of Government, the disappearance of Rex Walton meant no more than unpleasant publicity. The fact that his trusted servant was wanted by the police on a serious charge was of infinitely less importance than the difficulty of finding a new chauffeur to replace the promoted Bennett.

He hesitated too long, and it would now be rank bad manners to refuse the invitation.

"There are certain irregularities about Parker which I have discovered since, that I have not told," Mr. Coleman went on, "suspicions which I do not feel that I can discuss cold-bloodedly because they may seem fantastic, and a Treasury official, as you well understand, my dear Sepping, has a horror of being considered fantastic."

"I will meet you—at what time ?"

"At half-past seven," said Mr. Coleman. "And now I really must go."

At the conference held that afternoon Jimmy laid before his colleagues all he knew, and received from them in turn all the reports which had come to their several departments. It had been found impossible to locate the position whence Collett's mysterious message had been sent. A search of the papers at his office had given no clue whatever, either to the reason for his kidnapping or the manner in which he had offended Kupie.

"Taken in conjunction with the burglary at his office last Sunday morning, the astonishing occurrence is more than a little significant," said William

P. Dicker. "I shan't be surprised at anything which may happen to our friend."

"Has Coleman borne the loss of his legal adviser with his usual fortitude?" asked Inspector Levy, the new member of the inner council.

"Coleman's an inhuman devil," said Jimmy irritably. "He never made the briefest mention of Collett's disappearance, and his only anxiety is as to the possible effect the 'scandal' may have upon him."

When he returned to his own office he found a telegram waiting for him. It was from Dora and had been handed in at Marlow. It ran:

> *Please let me know any new developments. I am staying at Riverside House.*

He was folding up the telegram and dropping it into his waste-basket, when the telephone bell rang furiously and the voice of the exchange clerk called him.

"There's a man named Knowles on the line, who says he has a most important message for you, sir."

"Put him through," said Jimmy quickly.

There was a click and the urgent voice of Mr. Knowles greeted him.

"Is that you, Sepping? I am speaking from Tidal Basin."

"What is it, Knowles?" asked Jimmy.

"Who do you think I've just seen?"

"Who?" asked Jimmy eagerly, thinking for a moment that Rex had made another appearance.

"Julia!"

CHAPTER XXV

IN spite of his annoyance, Jimmy laughed.

"Well, what about it ?" he asked.

"She's living here in Carsholt Road—she and Tod Haydn."

"Tod Haydn ?" repeated Jimmy quickly. "Are you sure ?"

"Sure," was the reply. "I saw them together. They must have got married. She's his wife, and I wish him joy of her. I saw them coming out of the pictures five minutes ago, and I followed them. They look hard-up, too."

"Come along and see me at once," said Jimmy. "Take a taxi."

"I'll be with you in an hour ; I've got to go home first," was the reply.

Jimmy put down the receiver, and sat back in his chair, his hands clasped beneath his chin. In Julia he was not at all interested ; but Haydn must be pulled in and his connection with Kupie cleared up.

Half an hour passed—an hour—but Knowles had not arrived. Only that morning the little man had given up his self-imposed duty as nurse, and Jimmy realised that he had not even thanked him.

At half-past six he had not appeared. The detective looked up his private telephone guide and got on to the nearest police station.

"Go round to Knowles's house," he said, giving the address, "and find out what has become of him."

In a quarter of an hour he learnt that Knowles had arrived at the house within half an hour of his first telephone message. Somebody had met him as he went out; they had talked, and the two men had gone off together. Jimmy waited till a quarter-past seven, and then remembered, and heartily cursed, his dinner engagement. Fortunately there was no necessity for him to change, and he arrived at the "Splendide" on time to find a pensive Mr. Coleman sitting on one of the big lounges in the vestibule, reading the financial columns of an evening newspaper.

He looked up as Jimmy came in, and, taking off his glasses, rose.

"War stock is rising," he said, "and very few people will realise the tremendous debt of gratitude they lie under to the Treasury. . . ."

He talked Treasury into the second course of the dinner, and then, after repeated hints, he turned his reluctant mind to the question of Parker and his enormities.

"What I am telling you now, Sepping," he said, "I learnt quite by accident a few days ago. In a well-conducted household there is no inter-communication of confidence between the master and the servants; and things may happen under your very nose of which you are blissfully ignorant."

He went on to enlarge upon the enormities of the servant class, their peculiar furtiveness and inherent dishonesty, and Jimmy listened as patiently as he could, his mind upon Nippy Knowles and all his speculations directed to the possibility of that individual turning up at Scotland Yard. He had left instructions at the office that he was to be called the moment the man arrived.

"It was Bennett, my chauffeur, who told me this," said Mr. Coleman, coming at last to the heart of his disclosure. "Bennett has taken Parker's place, and I am beginning to learn, for the first time, something about that rascal. Until a servant is dismissed you never hear of his delinquencies; then they come thick and fast! I overlook the fact that for months he has been systematically robbing me by arrangement with the tradespeople, though this I cannot prove, because all servants are thieves, especially upper servants. But it seems that Parker has been carrying on a clandestine correspondence with a man named Haydn, who, on three separate occasions, had been received into the house during my absence."

"Alone?" asked Jimmy.

"Not alone," said Mr. Coleman sombrely. "With Haydn came a young person who is supposed to be his wife. I am not going to vouch for the relationship. She was an attractive young person, according to Bennett; and what is so exasperating and annoying to me is that Parker entertained these wretched people in my drawing-room! Just think of it, my dear fellow! Thieves and rascals and—er—heaven knows what, in my drawing-room! I blame Bennett for not telling me before——"

"What was the object of these visits?"

"I am coming to that," said Mr. Coleman. "Bennett stated that there was a great deal of writing—at Dora's desk, if you please! A *very* great deal of writing was done on these occasions, and once Bennett detected this wretched man Parker destroying a sheet of blotting-paper in the kitchen fire, and said he was certain he saw the word 'Walton' as the paper was consumed. Parker told him that these people were relations of his. Now another point," said Mr. Coleman. "You remember that when Walton made his extraordinary disappearance he left behind, in Dora's bag, a diamond pendant, or something of the sort?"

Jimmy nodded.

"Until yesterday that pendant was in a small jewel-case in Dora's room. She has asked me to say nothing about this to you, but I feel that I must. But I would ask you, my dear Sepping, to handle the matter with your customary delicacy."

Jimmy smiled at the unusual compliment.

"But what happened to the jewel?"

"Yesterday it vanished," said Coleman impressively. "Dora went to the safe to get some trinkets—a ring, or a necklace, or something of the sort—and found that the jewel had been taken. I blame her for not notifying the police immediately. Although I can quite understand that, after the terrible publicity which I've received over this unfortunate business, she might not have wished to offend me. But this was a very ordinary robbery, which might very well have had immediate police attention."

"Was the safe forced?" asked Jimmy, interested.

"No, it was opened, evidently with a key."

"Was anybody in the house?"

"Nobody but the cook and three women servants. Dora was out most of the day, and of course Bennett—though I would never dream of suspecting Bennett, who is a man of excellent character, and has several hundred pounds saved up in the Post Office bank."

"I won't ask you if there were any finger-prints on the safe door."

"Oh, but you may," said Mr. Coleman triumphantly. "As soon as I discovered what had happened I made a very careful inspection of the door with the aid of a large reading-glass, and to my unprofessional eye there appeared to be no sign at all."

"None of the other jewellery was touched?"

Mr. Coleman shook his head.

"Nothing but the pendant," he said.

"I think I shall have to see that safe," said Jimmy, and Mr. Coleman's face fell.

"I was afraid you would," he said. "However, 'in for a penny, in for a pound,' and there's no use in attempting to keep the police out of my house—I'm getting so used to it now! . . ."

Jimmy waited only to telephone through to his office to inquire whether any further trace of Nippy Knowles had been found, and then he accompanied Mr. Coleman to Portland Place.

It was a beautiful evening, with a clear sky and a full moon, and the walk was a pleasant one, Mr. Coleman, on the score of economy and the nearness of residence, refusing the suggestion of a taxicab.

It was a quarter to nine when Mr. Coleman let himself into the house.

"I am afraid I cannot offer you coffee," he said, "because my maids and my cook do not sleep on the premises."

"Then you'll be alone to-night?" said Jimmy.

"I shall be alone," agreed the other. "But I am by no means a nervous man. If I were I should not ask you to stay here," he said humorously, "because the presence of a police officer would be almost as disturbing as the presence of a burglar."

They went up the stairs together, Mr. Coleman leading the way. He switched on the light of Dora's room, and Jimmy followed him into that peaceful and pretty apartment. He had not remembered seeing the safe before, but now he recovered it from his memory. It did not look like a safe; it was one of those pretty and seemingly fragile cabinets which sometimes adorn a woman's room.

"Have you the key?" he asked, and Mr. Coleman took it from his pocket.

"I asked Dora to let me have it before she went, thinking you might wish to see the interior," he said.

There were no signs of finger-prints. Jimmy put the key in the lock and turned it. The safe was empty, and Mr. Coleman explained that after this contretemps he had sent all the jewellery which would not be required to the bank.

"Dora is sure she did not let the key out of her possession?"

"She is emphatic on that point," replied the other.

Jimmy looked round the room, taking in the details at his leisure. The silken curtains, the deep pile of the carpet, the little bed, with its table and its reading-lamp, the deep arm-chair by the tiled hearth——

"What is that door?" he asked. "Does it lead to anywhere?"

"It is a wardrobe cupboard," said Mr. Coleman.

He walked a few paces toward it, then stopped dead and stared down at the floor.

"What—what was that?" he quavered.

From beneath the door something was trickling that ran its zigzag course over the polished surround.

"Blood!" said Jimmy under his breath.

The key was in the lock; he turned it. As he did so, the door was pushed open, and something limp and heavy fell to the ground with a thud.

He stared down at the white face, scarcely able to believe his eyes.

It was Parker, and he was dead!

CHAPTER XXVI

"TELEPHONE to police head-quarters and tell them to send a couple of men as quickly as they can. You can also telephone to the Middlesex Hospital for an ambulance—no, I don't think you need do that," he said after a moment's thought. "Get the police."

He turned the body over on to its back. The waistcoat was wet with blood, and a brief examination told him that the man had been shot at close quarters, for the coat was singed. Switching on the light of the bedside lamp, he put it down by the side of the body and continued his examination. On the man's left hand was an old wrist-watch. The glass was broken and the wrist was bruised, as though it had been struck by some blunt weapon. The watch had stopped at twenty minutes to eight.

Death must have been instantaneous, he thought, and very little blood could have been shed. It was possible, therefore, that the body might have been carried into the room after it was dead, and hidden in the cupboard. It was equally likely that he was shot in the position he was found.

He made a search of the cupboard, and the latter hypothesis became a certainty, for the bullet had passed through the body and was embedded in the wooden lining of the wardrobe. Then began a very careful search of the dead man's pockets. A few Treasury notes, one or two pieces of silver, and an old metal watch, which was still going, rewarded his search. Why did Parker carry two watches? he wondered, though that was an eccentricity not peculiar to Parker.

Passing his hand over the coat, he felt something hard and square, and, from the inside pocket, he took out a red morocco case, which he instantly recognised before he pressed the spring and the top flew back, to show the fatal jewel which Rex Walton had left behind on the day of his flight.

Jimmy put the pendant down upon the bed and continued his search. And then he made a further discovery. It was a folded sheet of paper, enclosed in an open envelope. The paper was covered with writing in pencil, which he easily identified. It was the same writing that had come on all the Kupie letters, and was undoubtedly Parker's.

It began "Dear Tod," and it was obvious that the dead man had been interrupted in his writing, because it stopped about three inches from the bottom of the page and in the middle of a sentence. After a brief scrutiny he placed envelope and paper in his pocket-book. By this time Mr. Coleman had returned.

"They are coming immediately," he said, and for once Jimmy admired the man's calmness in face of tragedy. "Dora must be told," he said. "She talked of coming back to-morrow morning."

"Why not leave it till the morning?" said Jimmy, but Mr. Coleman shook his head.

"Dora is a very early riser, and besides, I don't want her to learn of this through the newspapers. He is dead ? "

Jimmy nodded.

" What was he doing there, do you think ? " asked Mr. Coleman, and then his eyes fell upon the trinket, and he uttered an exclamation. " Did you find this on him ? " he said.

" It was in his pocket," said Jimmy. " It is Dora's pendant, isn't it ? "

Mr. Coleman took up the case with its glittering contents and nodded.

" Yes, this is the pendant. And it was Parker——"

" It was either Parker or the man who killed Parker," said Jimmy. " I don't know . . . it is extraordinary."

Bill Dicker arrived at the same time as the divisional surgeon. The doctor did not trouble to do more than look at the silent figure.

" Oh, yes, he's dead. Shot, isn't he ? " he asked.

" Was he found there, Jimmy ? " asked Dicker, bending over the man.

Jimmy pointed to the cupboard.

" He was inside ; when I opened the door he fell out. How long has he been dead ? "

" Two or three hours, so far as I can tell," said the surgeon. " You will want him moved, I suppose ? I'll arrange that at once." He went downstairs with Mr. Coleman to telephone, and the two detectives were left alone.

" Well, what do you make of it ? "

" I make nothing of it," replied Jimmy Sepping with a helpless gesture. " The man was shot at close range, probably about twenty minutes to eight this evening." He pointed to the marks on the man's arm and the smashed wrist-watch. " I should imagine he put up a struggle, and was first bludgeoned and afterwards shot."

He gave a brief explanation of the discovery, and Bill Dicker began to wander round the room, his keen eyes taking in every little detail.

"No smell of cordite," he said. "That would be understandable if the windows were open, but they're closed. Therefore, we may suppose that after this man was shot the windows and doors were opened to get rid of the powder smell, and shut again. Curtains drawn—you say Miss Coleman was not sleeping here to-night? Why are the curtains drawn?"

"The same thought occurred to me," said Jimmy.

"The safe is open. What does that mean?"

Jimmy told him of Dora Coleman's pendant and its recovery.

"It was lost yesterday," said Dicker thoughtfully, "and recovered in the pocket of a man who was murdered in this room to-night. It is hardly likely that Parker or Felman would have carried this valuable property about with him for a day, and less likely that, if he had stolen it yesterday, he would have brought it back to-night. Therefore we must presume that Parker, unknown to Mr. Coleman, was hiding in this house all the time. I think it would pay us to have a look round."

They searched the house from top to bottom. Parker's room had been taken over by Bennett; it was therefore unlikely that it was here that a man had hidden, if Dicker's theory was correct. The wine-cellars adjoined the basement kitchen, as also did the coal-cellar. A very thorough inspection of these places brought them no nearer to the mystery of Parker's presence in the house.

It was on the basement level and in a larder, which Mr. Coleman explained was no longer used, that Jim found a mystery room. The entrance was concealed by a packing-case which stood on top of a square, stone trap-door, into which an iron ring had been let at some distant period.

" This looks as if it had been recently used," said Dicker.

He tugged at the ring, and the trap came up easily enough. Beneath was a black void, but his hand-torch showed him a wooden ladder leading down no great distance, and he descended, followed by Jimmy. They were in a small, square apartment, which had neither door nor outlet of any kind. Around the wall were a number of iron shelves. It was obviously the wine-cellar of a previous occupant of the house, and was not altogether empty, for there were two large boxes, branded with the name of an Oporto wine merchant.

" There's a windfall for you, Mr. Coleman," said Dicker with a half smile. " Unless the branding is wrong, you've got a couple of dozen bottles of '58 port."

" I never knew this place existed," said Mr. Coleman, " and certainly I have not used it. Of course I would not dream of drinking anybody else's wine. It must be returned to its rightful owner."

Jimmy sounded the walls, but they were solid, and they climbed up the ladder again, satisfied that there was no way out from this unsuspected crypt.

" The place is entirely without ventilators, and he could not have slept there without being asphyxiated," said Dicker.

Every room, and even the roof, was completely inspected, without bringing them any nearer to Parker's hiding-place. They were leaving the house when Jimmy remembered that he had promised to telephone to the girl; and after some delay he got through to Marlow, and the sleepy voice of a woman servant answered him. Eventually Dora was aroused, and, as simply as he could, he broke the news of the tragic happening in her bedroom. He heard her gasp.

"I will come up," she said.

"That is the very thing you mustn't do," said Jimmy. "You are to stay away until it is necessary for you to come to London."

He detected in her voice the shock that the news had given to her, and he was anxious to avoid the more devastating shock which he knew the evidence of the murder would cause her.

"But I must come up, I must!" she said. . . . "Murdered in my room! How terrible!"

Suddenly, and very sharply, she stopped and cut off the connection.

The police were now in possession of the house, and Mr. Coleman had gone across to the neighbouring hotel. Apparently the nature of the tragedy which had been enacted in his house was so tremendous that even the thought of the undesirable light that would be thrown upon his private life did not add to his distress.

Back at the Yard, Jimmy produced the letter he had found in the dead man's pocket. It was written in pencil, and had no address.

Dear Tod (it began), *there is a lot in this business that I don't understand. And I am pretty nearly through with it. The money you gave me to get abroad isn't nearly enough. I'm going to try to* *see you at the old place to-night, but if I don't, I am going to leave this letter. The Kupie business is bust, and I don't think you'll get the mug. I ought to get something extra for the letters. We had to cosh a man to get them, and it was very risky, because the busy came in soon after we left. If he'd been a few minutes earlier it would have been "good night, aunt." I will make another——*

There the letter ended.

"Another attempt to see you," finished Dicker. "And if I don't see you then, I'll post this letter."

"He saw him all right," said Jimmy grimly.

"What do you make of it?" demanded Dicker.

"The readiest explanation that comes to my mind," answered Jimmy, studying the letter again, "is that Parker met Tod, and Tod persuaded him to go after the diamond pendant. Obviously, Parker was only a tool—I suspected that long ago."

"You suggest, then, that both got into Coleman's house together, and that some sort of quarrel arose, during which this man was killed?"

Jimmy nodded slowly.

"That is too simple an explanation, but it is a fact that Parker wanted money, and it is quite possible that Tod might have told him where there was easy money to be had——"

"Parker knew that. Besides, the burglary occurred the day before," said the puzzled Jimmy.

"Tod may have done it," insisted Dicker. "It was the lure of the pendant—or possibly the pendant was the price he paid for the second attempt on the safe."

"Who is 'the mug' referred to?" asked Dicker breaking a long silence.

"Me, perhaps," said Jimmy bitterly. "And it *was* Julia's letters they were after! Albert was the man they 'coshed' and I was the 'busy' who came in just too late."

They sat together, hands in pockets, gloomily surveying the letter and the pendant that glittered in the light of the overhead branch lamp; then Jimmy roused himself with a sigh.

"There is one man I'd like to interview just now, and that is the eminent Mr. Knowles, who, in addition to being an expert burglar, has, I am certain, a mass of information about Tod Haydn. Anyway, we have enough evidence to pull in Tod, and without any further delay I think we ought to comb out Carsholt Street, Tidal Basin."

It was daylight before his arrangements were made. His first call was at Mr. Knowles's house at South Lambeth. Here he received some startling news from the landlady who came, half dressed, to the door.

"No, sir," she said, recognising Jim, "Mr. Knowles hasn't been home all night. It's rather worrying me, because he's a very regular man, and I've never known him to be out later than ten since he's been staying with me."

"Did you see the man who called for him last night?" asked Jimmy.

"I didn't see him, sir. He was a gentleman; I could tell that by his voice, and I know his name, too."

"You know his name?" said Jimmy eagerly "What was it?"

But the good lady had her story to tell her own way.

"Mr. Knowles had come in for five minutes, and was just going out, when this gentleman knocked. I was standing at the head of the stairs, and I heard him say, 'What can I do for you, sir?' and then the gentleman said, 'You know me, Knowles,' and Mr. Knowles seemed sort of taken back, and said, 'Why, Mr. Walton!'"

"Walton!" gasped Jimmy. "Are you sure?"

"Absolutely, sir. I could take my oath on the Bible in a court of law," said the landlady emphatically.

CHAPTER XXVII

INTO the complicated situation had come yet another complication. What had Rex Walton to do with the little burglar? He remembered now that Knowles had once told him that he had met Rex, and that Rex had been kind to him. But what possible service could Nippy render to this master of a million?

He drove, via the Blackwall Tunnel, to Tidal Basin, and there he found the search party waiting for him. Carsholt Street, unlike its slummy neighbours, was a thoroughfare of houses which are favoured by the decent artisan class, and at this hour of the morning was deserted, every window blind being drawn. They had not been assembled long before one of the doors opened, and a man came out, walking toward where Jimmy was standing. He was an early-morning workman, and he shot a suspicious glance at Jimmy as the detective advanced to meet him.

"No, sir, I don't know anybody named Haydn," he said when the reason for the hold-up was explained. "There are dozens of young couples living in this street. What's the girl like?"

"She is supposed to be very pretty," said Jimmy cautiously, for he was not prepared to accept Knowles's prejudiced view of Julia's beauty.

"There's only one pretty girl who lives in this street, and I've never seen her," said the workman. "She lives at No. 44; she and her husband has the upstairs room. I only know that because a mate of mine told me he'd seen her and her husband once. They don't live down here, as far as I can make out. They've got a room, and they come now and again. He's supposed to be a sailor, and she lives with her mother when he's at sea. I don't know what he looks like, any more than I would recognise her."

His informant was allowed to pass on, and presently another, this time a middle-aged woman, put in an appearance, and was stopped by one of the detectives and brought to Jimmy. For a time the experience of being held up by the police rendered her incoherent, but when she had recovered her power of speech she was able to supplement the information that they had received from the man.

"It must be the people at No. 44," she said. "There's nobody else that you could properly call pretty. He's a seafaring man. . . ."

Practically she repeated what they had already been told.

"They're at 44," said Jimmy, and, crossing the street, he walked up till he came abreast of the house.

Both upstairs and downstairs the blinds were drawn. He knocked, and there was an immediate answer. A succession of thumps in an uncarpeted passage came to his ears, and presently the door was opened and the white face of a boy stared at him from the darkness of the passage. He was a cripple, and was apparently the sole occupant of the downstairs rooms. His mother, he frankly confessed, was "doing twenty-one days for drunk."

" Who lives upstairs ? "

" Mr. and Mrs. Marsh," said the boy ; " but they're not at home. They very seldom stay here—in fact, I don't remember that they ever did."

Going upstairs, Jimmy found that there were only two rooms, and these he opened, despite the protests of the cripple. The back room was bare and empty. It contained not so much as a chair. The front room, however, was unusually well furnished for a house of this class. A comfortable couch, which, Jimmy found, could be converted into a bed ; a deep arm-chair ; a tall secretaire and a big table, were the principal contents of the room. The writing portion of the secretaire was empty.

" Not even a pen," said Jimmy. " Let us have a look at his books."

Tod Haydn's library—if this room belonged to the notorious Tod—consisted of a number of novels, a current " Who's Who," ten volumes of an encyclopædia, and a number of other books, mainly directories. There was also a map of England, with certain unusual boundaries drawn in in red ink, and these puzzled Jimmy, until one of the detectives who was with him supplied the explanation.

" Those are assize areas, sir," he said, pointing. " For instance, any crime committed inside that line would be tried at the Oxford Assizes ; any crime committed on the other side would be tried at Gloucester ; and beyond that, at Hereford."

Support came for this view when they found a law almanac with the dates of the assizes underlined.

" It looks rather as if our friend expected an appearance at court," said Jimmy.

" More likely that he had an idea of dodging trial," said the detective who had supplied the first solution. "In some of these places you may be held on bail or on remand for months until you're brought up before a judge. I should think he has worked out a scheme to get the longest remand possible in order to make his get-away. He has probably got bail already fixed. I know Tod Haydn's methods, and there isn't a better workman at the game. At least, there is nobody who can cover his tracks better than Tod."

"Have you seen him?"

The police officer shook his head.

"No, I can't say I've seen him, sir," he replied.

Jimmy opened all the drawers in the hope of finding some article of woman's wear, but here he was disappointed. Usually even the most careful of criminals leaves some minute trace of his presence; but there was not so much as a hairpin to betray the visit of Julia.

He interviewed the crippled boy and learnt that the couple had only been in the house for an hour, and they'd spent that time looking at maps.

"What kind of maps?"

"I don't know what kind, sir; but I took 'em up a cup of tea, and they were looking at the map together, and the gentleman had a pencil in his hand and was writing on a piece of paper."

When he was asked to describe the girl, he was vague—Jimmy believed purposely so. He found afterwards that the mother and the son lived rent free on the floor below, in return for such small services as the real landlord required. Mr. and Mrs. Marsh (this was the name by which they were known) did not usually live in the neighbourhood. The boy told the story he had already heard twice about Tod being a seaman, and the only additional information he gave was that Mrs. Marsh lived with her mother in the country. He was even more vague when they tried to pin him down to details.

Jim was leaving the house when a thought occurred to him, and he turned round to the boy.

" Where do you send the letters ? " he asked.

He saw, by the flush that came to the cripple's face and the look of intense annoyance that showed momentarily in his eyes, that he had asked the very question that the boy did not want to answer.

" He doesn't have many letters." The cripple hesitated. ' And when he does we keep them for him."

" Where do you send them ? " insisted Jim.

" I don't exactly remember the name, sir," pleaded the boy. " I haven't had a good memory since my accident. Mother knows better than I do."

With a Home Office order, Jimmy interviewed the absent landlady in the visitors' room at Holloway Prison. She was a stout and voluble woman, with a grievance against the police ; and when she discovered Jimmy Sepping's profession she broke into a torrent of denunciation which embraced every police service from Scotland Yard to the Fiji Islands, from which Jimmy would have gathered that this was not her first conviction, even if he had not known.

" It's no use your staying here, because I'm not going to copper anybody," said the woman truculently. " My lodgers are respectable people ; they keep themselves to themselves, and I keep myself to myself. And anyway, I'm not going to do anything for busies who'd swear your life away for a glass of beer. I was no more drunk——"

"Don't let us have an argument," pleaded Jimmy. "I'll see what I can do for you to get your sentence reduced if you'll be a good soul and answer my questions."

"I don't want my sentence reduced; I'm coming out the day after to-morrow!" said the good lady triumphantly. "And even if I was serving a hundred years I wouldn't tell you anything."

"You won't serve a hundred, but you may serve seven," said Jimmy, altering his tone. "I want your lodger for murder, and I needn't tell a sensible woman twice that, if she helps a murderer to escape justice, she is liable to penal servitude."

The attitude of the woman changed. From being defiant and glorying in her conviction, she began to wail and whine about the hard lot which was hers.

"If I never move from this spot, Mr. What's-your-name, I know no more about the Marshes than you do. They've been very good to me. I never pay any rent; they've given me my house rent free, and there's always a pound or two to be had for the asking."

"Where do you send their letters?"

She gave an address which, Jimmy knew, was an accommodation house of call in the West End. That told him nothing.

"When you send the letters to the country, where do they go?"

"I never do send the letters to the country," she said, and Jimmy believed her. "Who's been murdered, mister?" she asked, her curiosity getting the better of her.

Ordinarily, Jimmy would not have satisfied her, but on this occasion he was reaching out for clues, and he could not afford even to be reticent.

"A man named Parker or Felman," he said, and was unprepared for the effect his words had on the prisoner.

Her jaw dropped, her face went white, and she half rose.

"Felman!" she said hollowly. "My God! Who killed him?"

"I don't know, but I want to see Mr. Marsh in relation to this crime," said Jimmy. "Do you know Felman?"

She nodded, her lips quivering.

"Oh, my God!" she said again.

"Where did you meet him?"

And then, to his amazement, she burst into a torrent of weeping.

"Who was Felman?" he demanded.

"My husband!" she sobbed.

When she grew calmer, she told him that she had not been living with the man for years, but that he made her a small allowance, and that it was through him that she had got into the Marshes' house on such advantageous terms. And there she had seen her husband, because he had frequently called to confer with the Marshes, though he'd never taken very much notice of her.

"Mr. Marsh didn't kill him, that I'll swear," she said energetically. "He was very fond of Felman. Of course, Felman was a bad man and had been in trouble; but the idea of his being murdered is awful!"

"Do you know where your husband was employed?"

"Yes," she nodded, "at Mr. Coleman's, where he was called Parker. He told me he'd got into a very nice house, and he was going to make a lot of money. That is the only thing he ever told me about himself. And now to think that he's dead!" She burst into a fresh storm of sobs.

Jimmy left it to the local C.I.D. to watch the house.

"Though I do not expect we shall catch the birds," he said, "for either the boy or the woman will communicate with them—that is certain."

He snatched a few hours' sleep and was again at his desk by noon, interviewing such of the privileged reporters as had the entrée to his office. Whether Dora had come to town or not he did not know, for his inquiries took him away from the house in Portland Place. He neither saw nor heard from Knowles; the little man seemed to have disappeared as completely and as mysteriously as any of those who had gone before him. His landlady reported that he had not returned to the house, and a search of his usual haunts, including his favourite restaurant in Soho, drew a blank.

"I think I'd better come into this case now," said Bill Dicker. "You've got rather a big plateful, Jimmy. Your Digger man, by the way, has been remanded, though I don't really believe you've got sufficient evidence to convict him. Do you think he'll squeal any more?"

"He's squealed all he knows," said Jimmy decisively. "We've come to a cul-de-sac. The real squeaker is dead."

"You mean Parker, of course?" nodded Bill Dicker. "His letter struck me that way. The man was scared and ready to turn State evidence. If we could only have got him before *they* did!"

So rapid had been the developments, so many were the events which overlay the disappearance of Rex Walton, that Jimmy had almost forgotten his first and last task had been to discover the whereabouts of his friend. Joan reminded him of the fact when he met her for tea that day at the Carlton.

"I'm making a confession to you, Jimmy, that will seem extraordinary," she said. "*I'm* not worried about Rex."

He nodded.

"I felt somehow like that myself," he said. "Although I know that behind all these shocking crimes lies danger to your brother, I am satisfied in my mind that he is better prepared now than ever he has been to meet attack."

She had not heard about the disappearance of Knowles. The newspapers had been filled with the Portland Place murder, and even if Jimmy had given the information to the press, it was unlikely that the linotype machines would have worked hard over a convicted burglar being unaccountably absent from his home.

"I don't understand it," she said, shaking her head, when he told her. "Rex knew this nice little man. I remember Mr. Knowles telling us. But what did he want him for?"

"Heaven knows," said Jimmy piously; "and I am almost content to leave the solution of the whole darned business to providence."

Then, to his surprise, she asked:

"Jimmy, can you find me a job?"

"What on earth do you mean?" he demanded, and she laughed softly at the sensation she had created.

"I haven't a great deal of money left; I don't know whether that occurs to you; and I've a big house to keep up—a house which I cannot legally dispose of. And unless Rex returns very soon, I shall have to do something." Her pretty brows knitted in a frown. "That is what I can't understand, Jimmy—why Rex leaves me almost penniless. That cannot be right. Rex would not hurt me; I'm sure of that."

"Perhaps he has forgotten that he disposed of your money," suggested Jimmy after a moment's consideration. "He had a large sum of money when he disappeared, didn't he?"

"I thought he had, but the only person who could tell us with certainty is the valet, who has gone also. Doesn't it frighten you sometimes, Jimmy? It is so very inexplicable. First Rex, then Wells, then poor Mr. Collett, and now Knowles. Who will be next, I wonder?"

"What I'm wondering," said Jimmy cheerfully, "is who will be the first to reappear."

That was a question which was answered in a dramatic fashion before he was a few hours older

CHAPTER XXVIII

DORA had returned to town, he learnt later in the day, when a note came from her asking him to call at Portland Place. As he fingered the envelope, he remembered the last letter he had received from the girl, and the extraordinary coincidence which had led Dicker to detect, through a thumbmark on the envelope, the identity of the dead Parker.

Mr. Coleman was out, Bennett told him as he admitted him to the house.

"This a terrible business, sir," said the new butler, "terrible! We seem to have nothing but trouble. I wish I'd been here when that man called this afternoon."

"Which man was that?" asked Jimmy absently.

"Nobody seems to know. Mr. Coleman said he was a stranger to him."

"What happened?"

"Mr. Coleman opened the door himself. In fact, he was just going out. And then, without a word, this person hit him across the face with a stick or a whip he was carrying."

Jimmy's mouth opened in surprise.

"Hit Mr. Coleman? Why?" he asked.

"That is what Mr. Coleman wants to know."

"Did he recognise the man?"

"No, sir; he'd never seen him before in his life"

"But didn't Mr. Coleman chase him, or hand him over to a policeman?"

"No, sir; he was so dazed that the man was gone before he could recover himself. It thoroughly upset him."

"I give it up," said Jimmy with a shrug. "It is such a jig-saw puzzle that I despair of ever——Miss Coleman is in the drawing-room?"

Dora looked very pale and hollow-eyed. She said she had not slept after he had wakened her, and, in spite of the protest of her father, she had insisted on coming up to town.

"Of course, we're not staying here to-night," she said. "I couldn't." She shuddered and went a shade paler. "Jimmy, what did you find this morning? Father was telling me to-day about the pendant. Was there anything else? Did you make any kind of discovery at all that would help you to bring the murderer to justice?"

"None," said Jimmy.

They were alone, and suddenly, to Jimmy's embarrassment, she laid both hands on his shoulders and her lovely head on his breast.

"Oh, Jimmy," she sobbed, "I'm so sick of it all, so sick of it all! I wish to God I was dead!"

He comforted her as well as he could.

"My dear girl, you're overwrought," he said. "You want to go away into the country and stay there. There's absolutely no need for you to give any kind of evidence at the inquest. I'm going to advise your father to take you to the Continent for a month or two."

She shook her head.

"I can't go, Jimmy," she said, drying her red eyes with a tiny handkerchief. "Don't look at me. I know I look horrible. I should like to tell you such a lot. You are a good sort." She gripped his arm, her wet eyes fixed wistfully on his face.

"I'm beginning to think I'm a very poor sort," he said, laughing ruefully. "In fact, I'm getting more and more like the official detective that you read about in 'Sherlock Holmes.' I dither from clue to clue, I dodge from here to there, and all the time I'm coming against a blank wall."

"There's father," she said, as the soft thud of the door reached their ears.

Mr. Coleman came in a few seconds later, and Jimmy stared at him. There was no doubt as to the violence of the assault upon him. Across his face was a livid weal, his nose was swollen, and one eye was blackened.

"Look at poor father," she said, and Mr. Coleman growled something under his breath.

"I'm awfully sorry to see this, Mr. Coleman," said Jimmy in all sincerity, for, although he did not like the little man, he could not help feeling sorry for him.

"Oh, it's nothing, nothing," growled Coleman testily. "Of course, I shan't be able to go to the office for a day or two. The doctor says it may be weeks before these bruises disappear."

"Bennett told me what happened. I wish you had caught the brute."

"So I do," said the other impressively. "My dear fellow, of course I wish I'd caught him. I would have killed him, sir! I would have struck him with the first thing that came to my hand, sir. We are staying at the Portland Place Hotel to-night," he said. "I am thinking seriously of selling this house. My expenses for the next month or so will be fearful. What with income-tax and super-tax, I might as well be going into the workhouse. Even my own little private fortune is gradually being eaten up."

"Father," said the girl gently, "I'm sure Jimmy doesn't want to hear our domestic troubles."

Again Jimmy heard the front door close, and wondered who the visitor was.

"If Walton had only——" began Mr. Coleman, when the door opened, and a man walked in, at the sight of whom the silence of utter amazement fell upon him.

It was Lawford Collett!

CHAPTER XXIX

"WHERE have you come from?" asked Jimmy, finding his voice.

"I should like to be able to tell you," drawled the other, "but I haven't the slightest idea. All I know is, it's three hours away and on a yacht of some kind. I want to see you, Mr. Coleman."

He was looking seriously at the disfigured face of his client.

"What has happened?" he asked.

"I'll tell you later," said Mr. Coleman gruffly. "What is the meaning of this, Collett? Where have you been?"

"I was kidnapped. May I smoke?" He took a thin gold cigarette-case from his pocket, opened it, and selected a cigarette with such care that it might have been thought that there was more than one variety. He lit the cigarette and sat down, stretching himself luxuriously in the arm-chair into which he had sunk. "I was kidnapped," he said; "picked up in the streets of London, in spite of our beautifully efficient police force; taken to some seaside place; put on board a yacht, and held prisoner there until this afternoon. The ship had a wireless transmission set, and fortunately I understood the method of working. Unfortunately or fortunately, the message I was sending out to the world was not allowed to go."

"But who kept you prisoner?" asked Jimmy. "I suppose there was somebody on board the yacht in control?"

"There was indeed," said the other grimly. "But who it was, I don't know."

Jimmy was scrutinising him keenly. The man was lying; of that he was sure.

"Can't you do a little hard thinking and tell me who it was?" he asked quietly.

"Perhaps I will later," said Lawford Collett, blowing out a ring of smoke and watching it float to the ceiling. "At the moment I feel extremely reticent. Nobody knows I am back, and I do not want to see those infernal reporters."

"Apart from the infernal reporters," said Jimmy, "may I suggest that you owe the police some explanation? We have taken a lot of trouble about you, and you are billed from one end of the country to the other as being amongst the missing."

"I will make a full statement in due course," said Collett in his prim way. "At present I do not wish or intend to say any more than what I have said."

Under these circumstances, Jimmy wondered why he had taken the trouble to make his appearance at Portland Place, unless it was that Mr. Coleman was the only known relative he had. All thought or opportunity for a private talk with Dora was now out of the question, and soon after Jimmy went, leaving Lawford Collett mystifying Mr. Coleman with the tantalising half-truth of his adventure.

Whatever wishes Collett may have had in regard to keeping his arrival secret, there were certain official formalities which had to be gone through, and before eleven o'clock that night every newspaper in London knew that Collett had either escaped or been released by his unknown captor. Arriving in his flat in Park Lane at midnight, Lawford Collett was disgusted to find a dozen reporters literally waiting on the mat. He took them into his bijou sitting-room and addressed them *en masse.*

" I can only tell you, gentlemen, that I was kidnapped by some unknown miscreant, that I was taken on board a yacht and was put into a cabin and held prisoner. I will add to that the exciting information that for a portion of the time I was shackled. Otherwise, I was not badly treated, and I was released this afternoon."

" Where was the yacht ? . . . Who captured you ? . . . What is the story of your wireless message ? "

A dozen questions were shot at him. Lawford Collett satisfied them, not so far as he was able, but so far as he was willing.

" In due course the whole story will be told," he said as he shepherded them out of his apartment, " but in the meanwhile I am very anxious to get a good night's sleep."

He closed the door on them and walked thoughtfully back to his sitting-room. For one who wanted sleep, his conduct was peculiar. For two hours he was turning out the contents of his desk, reading and destroying papers ; and when at last his bureau had been emptied to his own satisfaction, he began a search of the books on his library shelf, selected a few volumes, and put them at the bottom of a trunk, which he began to pack. At seven o'clock he went up the stairs of his office in Henrietta Street and unlocked the door. He made a very careful inspection of the papers, which he knew had already been under the scrutiny of the police. There were one or two documents to be burnt, a few to be extracted from one of the deed boxes which surrounded the room, and transferred to his pocket. At half-past nine the banks opened, and, prompt to the minute, Mr. Lawford Collett went through the swing doors of the London and Birmingham Bank, nodded to the astonished cashier and asked to see the manager.

The interview was a brief one. At its expiration, Lawford Collett presented a cheque for £7,300, drew the bulk of it in Bank of England notes, and stored them in various pockets. Then he went back to his flat and ordered breakfast, cutting short the expressions of delighted welcome which his servant was prepared to deliver.

"Get me my breakfast. I am leaving for the Continent by the eleven o'clock train. Send all my letters on to the Hotel Meurice. I shall be in Paris for a fortnight."

He finished his breakfast and drove to Cook's office, and became one of a crowd that besieged the ticket counter. Presently his turn came.

"I want a first-class single fare to Christiania by way of Hull, a first-class single fare to Munich by way of Harwich-Cologne-Berlin, and a first-class single ticket to Paris via Calais," he said.

When the tickets had been made up, he paid, and went back to the cab which was waiting at the door of the tourist office. His two trunks he put in the baggage office at Victoria, and with his suit-case he walked down the subway to the Metropolitan station.

He booked to Southend by way of West Ham. From Southend he could work his way along the East Coast by easy stages to Harwich. Early in the afternoon he came to Southend, and, going into a local barber's, had his hair cut short and his upper lip shaved. These attentions, plus a pair of horn-rimmed spectacles and a bright brown suit, changed his appearance so that few would have known him.

In the afternoon he worked back to Colchester and took the night train for Ely. It would have been better for Lawford Collett if he had not been so reticent.

At two o'clock in the morning, Jimmy, returning, weary and baffled, to his flat, found Albert hanging on to the telephone receiver.

" They're waiting for you, sir."

" Who is it ? "

" The office, sir."

Jimmy took the receiver.

" Is that Mr. Sepping ? " said the voice of the night inspector. " We've just had a wire through from the Essex police. The dead body of Mr. Lawford Collett has been found in a first-class compartment."

" Dead ? " said Jimmy.

" Shot at close range, according to the police report. They identified him by the name inside the hat—his pockets were empty."

CHAPTER XXX

THE murder had been committed by somebody who had probably travelled in the next compartment and had made his or her way along the footboard and, first having shot the unfortunate man through the open window, had entered the carriage and rifled his pockets. The body was then rolled beneath the seat, and was not discovered until a passenger, entering the train at Ely, had been startled to find blood on the seat. The stationmaster at the little half-way junction where the Ely train drew up was certain that no doors were open ; so it was obvious that the murder was committed in the vicinity of the junction, for the dead man's hat, by which he was identified, was found upon the road, two miles south of the junction.

" He was clearly trying to get out of the country secretly," reported Jimmy to his chief. " He had changed his appearance, had his hair cut short and was clean-shaven, and he had wired to Ely for a room in a false name. Collett paid his servant six months' wages, and made him a gift of the contents of the flat, confirming the gift in writing. He left his big trunks at Victoria, and only had a suit-case, which has also been found on the road, containing a change of clothing.

" Had he any money ? "

" Over seven thousand pounds," said Jimmy.

"It is gone. In many respects the murder resembles that of Parker. The man was shot close at hand, probably with a pistol fitted with a Maxim silencer, because no sound was heard by people in one of the two next compartments. My theory is that he was watched from the moment he left his flat in the morning until the moment of his death, and that the watcher was also the killer."

"Kupie?" suggested Bill Dicker, who had apparently been up all night, for he looked tired-eyed that morning.

"I am not going to commit myself to giving the murderer a name, but I will go so far as to say that the man who killed Parker killed Collett."

"What motive do you suggest?"

"The same motive, in the case of Collett, as we supposed in the case of Parker," said Jimmy. "Collett was just going to squeak."

Bill Dicker whistled.

"You're suggesting that Collett was in the Kupie swindle?"

"There's no doubt whatever," said Jimmy quietly. "Compare the dates of Collett's rise to prosperity, and you'll find that he ceased to be a police-court lawyer, living from hand to mouth on the fees he might extract from the miserable clients at Bow Street, at about the time when Kupie began his activities. Immediately after, Collett became well off; was able to take a few sober clients to give him the appearance of respectability, amongst whom we can put Mr. Coleman. But all the time he was the intermediary of Kupie. Don't you realise that, in all the cases where the victims of Kupie paid up, the negotiations were conducted through Lawford Collett?"

"But in one case Kupie was paid nothing," said

Bill Dicker, shaking his head. " How do you account for that ? "

" It was the first blackmail case that Kupie had attempted," said Jimmy, " and Lawford Collett handled it so skilfully that he got back the compromising letters without costing his client anything—anything, that is, except Collett's fee. What was the result of the wide publicity given to Collett's success ? Every person who was blackmailed by Kupie came to Collett ! The first case was sheer advertisement, designed to show what a clever fellow Collett was in getting people out of Kupie's clutches. Thereafter, any person who had trouble with the blackmailer went straight away to Lawford Collett, and in the end—paid ! It seems most likely that he had had a quarrel with his confederates, and that he was making his way out of the country before the blow fell—another proof that Kupie is desperate. They killed Parker because he had threatened to squeak ; they killed Collett for the same reason."

It was much easier to explain Collett's end than it was for Jimmy to account satisfactorily for the unprovoked attack upon Mr. Coleman. The more he thought of the unaccountable behaviour of the stranger who had called at the house in Portland Place, the more confounded he became. It might, of course, have been a lunatic, or some person with an old grievance against the official, or he might have mistaken him for somebody else. Who ? The blow had been a terrible one and it had shaken the man—Jim had seen his hands trembling when he was describing the assault, and it was not the trembling of impotent rage.

When night came, Jimmy caused a message to be broadcasted to all wireless stations, in the hope that it might be picked up upon the mysterious yacht where Lawford had been a prisoner:

> *Will the owner or master of the yacht upon which Mr. Lawford Collett was recently a visitor, communicate immediately with Scotland Yard in the interests of justice?*

There was no reply to this, and, in truth, Jimmy had not had any great expectations that there would be.

After the message had been sent, he made a call at the Portland Place Hotel, to find, as he feared would be the case, that Dora was prostrate and was invisible, even to her father.

" You are perfectly sure that Collett said nothing about his experience on the yacht ? " Jimmy asked Mr. Coleman for the third time that day.

" Absolutely sure," said the little man. Something of his assurance and his pomposity had gone out of him. He was a pricked bladder of his former self, almost meek, near to humbleness. Even the opinions of his exalted colleagues of the Treasury seemed to carry no weight with him, nor yet the possibility of his figuring as a witness in two vulgar inquests.

" We tried to persuade Lawford to tell us, Dora and I, but you know Collett. He was flippant and elusive, as he always is, and in the end, when he went away, we were no wiser than we had been when he came."

" Had he any enemies ? "

Mr. Coleman shook his head.

" I cannot tell you. I know very little about him. He was a good lawyer, and a very useful man to me, as he has been to so many people. There is no clue, I suppose ? "

Mr. Coleman sighed.

" Poor Dora will not eat or drink. She was very fond of Lawford," he said. " I suppose there is no doubt that it *is* Lawford ? "

When Jimmy left the hotel he hardly noticed a taxicab drawn up by the kerb some distance from the entrance, and he was passing without a thought when a white hand came out and beckoned him. He walked back to the cab door.

" Joan ! " he said in astonishment. " What the dickens are you doing here ? "

" I came after you. I've been waiting for you for hours," she said. " First I went to Scotland Yard, and Mr. Dicker very kindly told me you had gone to the hotel. How is poor Dora ? "

Jim shook his head.

" She is very ill, I am afraid," he said.

She hesitated.

" I suppose I ought to go and see her, but I want to speak to you so much, and I don't think Dora will want to be bothered. Will you ask if she will see me ? "

Jimmy went back to the hotel and caught Mr. Coleman as he was stepping into the elevator.

" She won't see anybody," said Mr. Coleman sadly. " Will you tell Joan that she's in such a low state that the doctor has ordered her complete quiet ? "

He returned with the message, and the girl heaved a sigh of relief.

" Step in, Jimmy, unless you've got your own car here."

" It doesn't run to cars," said Jimmy as he stepped in beside her. " Now what is your trouble, that you shadow me round London when I go about my lawful occasions ? "

"Jimmy, you're either a generous darling or I'm mad."

"Put me down generous," said Jimmy. "You are the sanest young person I know."

"But I can't accept it, Jimmy. I must find some work."

"Accept what?" he asked.

"The money you sent me."

"I didn't send you any money. Heaven knows, I wouldn't dare." There was a silence. "When did you receive it?"

"This afternoon," she said. "It came in a registered envelope—ten one-hundred pound notes." Then: "Oh!" she said suddenly. "I wonder if it was Rex!"

"It may have been Rex, but it certainly wasn't me," said Jimmy. "Where had it been posted?"

"In Central London. Naturally, that was the first thing I looked for. It was Central London G.P.O."

"Was there no letter or card?"

She shook her head.

"Nothing. Just the registration, and the sender was a 'J. Smith,' which of course is a false name. That's why I thought it was you."

"I love you for thinking so," said Jimmy softly, "but I wouldn't dare do it. Besides which, I haven't been east of Temple Bar, except when I went to Tidal Basin, for weeks and weeks."

She leant forward and tapped at the window, and the taxi moved round in a circle, heading for Oxford Street.

"You must tell me where I can drop you. I am going back to Chelsea," she said.

"Then drop me at Chelsea," said Jimmy "I am going that way."

The cab drew up before the house, and a lounger who had been strolling idly along the pavement opened the cab door and walked on.

"An obliging stranger," said the girl, and then, with a sudden start: "Who is that, Jimmy? It isn't another watcher?"

"I think it is," said Jimmy, his smile lost in the darkness. "Only he's a watcher on the right side of the law—otherwise, a detective."

"But have you got a man on guard here?"

Jimmy did not explain until after he had seen the notes that she had received. The remittance consisted of ten new hundreds, consecutively numbered.

"Wait a moment," he said, and took out his pocket-book, in which, he remembered, he had put down details of the notes which Rex had drawn from the bank. At the very first glance he saw that these ten were part of the series which had been paid to Walton. "Your little mystery is cleared up. They're from Rex," he said, and showed her the entry in his book.

She looked at the notes in silence.

"I'm glad he sent the money, for the thought behind it," she said at last. "Jimmy, is it true that Mr. Collett has been murdered? I've only seen a brief account in the evening newspapers."

"Quite true," he answered soberly.

"What is the meaning of it all?" she asked. "Has—has Rex anything to do with it?"

"Probably Rex and his million," said Jimmy. "If you mean, did Rex kill Collett, my answer is an emphatic 'no.' Lawford Collett was killed by somebody who had reason to believe that he had betrayed them."

It was then that she asked about the man on guard outside the house.

"He isn't exactly on guard," he said carefully, "but he's here or hereabouts in case somebody comes along who—well, it is difficult to explain."

"You think I am in some danger?" Her voice was steady, and her grave eyes fixed him soberly.

"I think we're all in danger," he evaded. "At least, we shall be until we lay Kupie where he belongs."

"Then you believe that Kupie is responsible for these terrible crimes?"

"I am certain of that," he answered promptly. There was no advantage in mystifying her, and it was well that she should know the extent of the danger which threatened. "The two men who were watching your house, and the two who were listening in to your telephone, were not behaving in that extraordinary way from any love of adventure. Two, at least, were desperadoes of the worst type—gunmen who can still be hired in this city to terrorise, if not to shoot. One of them, at any rate, did shoot," he added with a little smile, as he remembered his own experience.

"Why were they watching?" she asked.

"They were watching for Rex."

She uttered an exclamation of astonishment.

"Rex? Whatever did they want with Rex?"

"They wanted to prevent him from coming back to the house. They were keen on preventing his communicating with you in any way. That is the vital and simple explanation of the care they took to cut into your telephone line and to watch your house. I haven't the slightest doubt that, if Rex had returned two or three days after his disappearance, he would have been killed on your doorstep. That is the view of Digger."

" Where is Rex now ? " she asked, but he shook his head.

" I don't know. I don't even understand the mystery of his disappearance. I understand less why he should remain away, though it is extremely probable that he knew about these watchers. I've made inquiries, Joan, and I've found that your house was not the only one guarded. Men have been seen outside the flats in which I live, and probably Rex, when I spotted him from the window, saw these gentlemen also. There is a chance—the merest chance—that Kupie is still determined to prevent Rex Walton's return. If that is so, he will leave no stone unturned to achieve his object. I am afraid you'll have to endure the nuisance of a shadow for the next week or two."

He was worried about her, for at the back of his mind there lurked an uneasy sense of danger to the girl. In what manner, and from what direction, harm would come to her, he could not guess ; but he sensed the malignity and the desperation which supported all Kupie's acts. Men who did not hesitate to kill their former colleagues, who did to death one of their own leaders, in Parker, would not stop for a second to consider this girl if she stood in their path.

Kupie had assumed a new guise and a new significance. No longer was he the blackmailing letter writer. He was something far more sinister. He spoke his thoughts aloud when he said :

" I do not think that Kupie will ever write another letter—and that is all to the good."

" Why ? " she asked in surprise.

" Because he has accomplished his purpose. He set himself out to get your brother's million, and he has got it."

She looked at him open-mouthed.

"Do you really mean that?" she asked in a hushed tone, as all that his words implied came to her.

"I really think so. There can be no other explanation of why Rex is keeping in the background."

He wanted to ask her whether there were any firearms in the house, but he was nervous to alarm her. Instead, he made an excuse to see the butler, a man of vigorous middle age It was whilst the girl had gone upstairs—Jimmy had sent her in search of the envelope in which the notes had come—that he took the butler into his confidence.

"Thank you, sir, for warning me," said the man quietly. "I am not a bit surprised, for I knew, when Mr. Rex disappeared, there was more trouble coming. I've an army revolver in the house, and all the doors are fitted with burglar alarms. What time would you imagine they are likely to come, if they came at all?"

Jimmy hazarded a guess.

"Between twelve and three," he said. "After that it is too light; before then the house is awake."

"Very good, sir," said the man in a determined tone. "I don't go to bed till three o'clock in the morning. I'll have to make some sort of explanation to Miss Walton."

"You can tell her that I have asked you to stay up until three for any late messenger that may come from Scotland Yard."

As a matter of fact, he saved the butler the embarrassment of invention by informing the girl himself, and went away in a happier frame of mind.

If Kupie struck, he would strike quickly—that was a certainty. If he had, for his own purpose, any designs on the safety or life of the girl, he would not delay action very much longer.

After Jimmy had gone to bed that night, he got up again to telephone to the Yard and order the reinforcement of the watch outside Cadogan Place by yet another man. This precaution was justified, but, as it proved, a little tardy.

CHAPTER XXXI

PHILIP, the butler, found himself nodding over the book he was reading; and, getting up from the chair, where he had been half dozing and half reading, stretched himself and yawned. He looked at the clock; the minute hand pointed to half-past one. He lit a ring on the gas-range, put on a kettle of water, and then, stepping noiselessly into the butler's pantry, which led from the kitchen, he made his second tour of the house, stopping to examine the doors and such of the windows as led on to the landings. He saw nothing to excite his suspicion, except, when he came down the stairs, he detected from the corner of his eye a momentary flash of light upon the stained-glass pane of a large window which lit the first landing. He turned quickly, but the light was gone. Deciding it was a trick of eyesight, he returned to the pantry and brewed himself a cup of tea. No sound broke the silence of the house save the solemn tick-tock of the hall clock. Indeed, the house was so still that he could hear the faint ticking of the French clock in the drawing-room.

Twice in the course of his vigil he had looked out through the windows in the darkened dining-room, and had gained some satisfaction from the sight of the man who was patrolling the pavement outside. And now, feeling unaccountably lonely, and for some reason nervous, he put down his half-empty cup and went up the short flight of stairs, along the hall and into the drawing-room, and again peeped into the street. The detective on guard was nowhere in sight. Probably, thought Philip, he had strolled to the corner, and sympathised with him, for he was beginning to understand how utterly wearisome watch-keeping can be.

Minutes passed, but there was no sign of the detective. He thought he would open the door and look out, but hesitated with his finger on the latch. It was now a quarter to two, and he walked slowly back toward the pantry, his hand on the butt of the revolver in his jacket pocket. He was half-way down the steps when he stopped. The pantry light was out, and there swept up to him a draught of air which could only be accounted for by the kitchen door being open.

He pulled out his revolver and thumbed back the hammer. Then, stepping stealthily downwards, he put his hand into the black doorway for the electric switch. He heard the whistle of something falling, and tried to dodge back; but it was too late. A loaded cane crashed down on his unprotected head, and he fell like a log. The dark figure that had struck him down lifted and carried him into the kitchen.

" Put a serviette in his mouth and tie his hands," he said, and the man who was with him obeyed.

Joan did not sleep well that night. Perhaps it was Jimmy's warning which had perturbed her; more likely, it was the closeness of the night. She tried to read herself to sleep, but, though she made her eyes ache, sleep did not come when she switched out the light.

The window opposite her bed was open a little at the top, a little more at the bottom; and when, at half-past one, the stuffiness of the night was relieved by a gentle wind, her eyes closed and she was almost asleep, when something woke her. It was the creak of a board, and it came from outside her door. Instantly she was awake, and with wildly beating heart was standing by the foot of the bed. She crept softly across the floor until she stood by the door, the knob under her hand. No other sound came, but presently her blood froze with horror as she felt the knob turning slowly in her hand. Fortunately, the door was always locked and bolted, and she heard a whispered colloquy.

"Who's there?" she asked, keeping her voice under control.

"It is Philip, miss," whispered somebody, and her hand was on the key when she remembered, and drew it back as though the iron were hot. Philip would not try the handle of her door without knocking.

"Wait a moment, Philip," she said, striving hard not to betray her terror. "I will put on my dressing-gown."

First she switched on the lights and, going back to her bed, began to dress. Her hands were trembling to such an extent that she found it almost impossible to fasten the garments as she put them on; and apparently the men outside grew impatient, for presently the one who had spoken said:

"How long are you going to be, miss? It is important."

"I shan't be long, Philip," she said.

The bed rested on easy-running castors, and, exerting all her strength, she dragged the sturdy brass bedstead across the room and pushed its back to the door. As she did so, there was a crash, and a panel of the door quivered. They were breaking in. She looked round wildly for some weapon and saw that on her dressing-table was a big silver hand-mirror. She snatched it up, and, as a man's arm came through one of the shattered panels and reached for the key, she brought the glass down upon the wrist with all her might. There was a yell of pain, and the hand was withdrawn.

She did not expect help from Philip ; she knew he must be incapable of assisting her, otherwise they would not dare to have made so open an attack. From the region above came a scream. One of the women servants had wakened, and had heard the man outside say : " Put your shoulder to the door."

The lock broke, and the bed held the door in its place. And then, from downstairs, came the sound of a rattling knocker. Somebody was trying to gain admission. She heard the startled exclamation of the second man.

" Go down and get him," whispered the other, and for a few minutes Joan had a respite. She utilised this to drag a table forward so that it wedged between the dressing-table and the bed.

Who had knocked ? In a flash she realised that whoever it was, was in peril, and, throwing up the window, she cried down :

" Be careful. A man is coming down to—to—get you." She could think of no other word, but that she emphasised.

" Is that you, Miss Walton ? Is anything wrong?" called the man on the steps below.

" Yes—yes, please. . . . Somebody is trying to get into my room . . ."

So far she got, when a police whistle sounded shrilly. The sound of the whistle reached the man on guard outside the door, and she heard him curse, and the thud of his stockinged boots as he flew down the stairs. She dared not follow, even to let in the police.

On the dressing-table lay the bag she had put down when she had come back with Jimmy. She remembered that in one of the pockets was the key to the front door. Her hand shook as she took it out, and, leaning out of the window, she called again.

" I am throwing down the key."

She saw a dark figure come out of the portico on to the sidewalk. There was a ring of metal as the key struck the road, and then :

" I've got it," said the man.

Five minutes later, shaking from head to foot, she was pushing back the bed to admit him.

He was a constable from Scotland Yard, and he heard her brief but incoherent story with a worried frown.

" There was an officer on duty outside. Have you seen or heard of him ? " he asked.

" No—I don't know—I haven't seen anybody," she said.

She was very white, and, in his alarm, he thought she was going to faint, and poured out a glass of water. But Joan's resolution overcame her weakness.

" We must find Philip," she said ; " the butler, I mean. I know he hasn't gone to bed, because he told me he was waiting up till three in case Captain Sepping rang through."

" I'll go down and look for him."

" May I come ? " she asked nervously. " Of course, I know there's no danger, but I'd rather be with you."

He stopped in the hall to make a quick inspection of her little sitting-room and the dining-room behind; then he went down the stairs toward the kitchen. He had not put a foot inside the butler's pantry when the groans of Philip came to him.

"'Coshed,'" he said tersely. "Kupie always 'coshes.' It is a peculiarity of his."

She had not heard the word before, but she guessed its meaning. Lifting the half-swooning man to a chair, he bathed his face with water, and presently Philip opened his eyes and looked stupidly from one to the other.

"Thank God you're safe, miss!" he muttered, and fainted again.

Between them they got him on to a couch in his little room, then the detective went to telephone. He returned in a few minutes.

"Your wire is cut," he said. "I've sent a policeman for the doctor."

By this time there were four uniformed men on the sidewalk outside the house, and it was one of those who roused Jimmy Sepping. That young man went to the door, knowing instinctively that something had happened to Joan. In a few words the constable acquainted him with what had happened, and Jimmy dressed quickly and was at Cadogan Place before the butler had recovered consciousness.

"What happened to the other officer?" asked Jimmy when the second detective met him at the door.

"We found him in the area, sir. He must have been beaten by somebody who came up behind him."

He inspected the kitchen door. Two circular holes were cut at the top and the bottom, and through these apertures the bolts must have been drawn.

"I heard nothing at all," protested Philip, who had now recovered sufficiently to tell his story. "It is surprising how they did it."

Jimmy was not at all surprised. He knew the instrument which had been employed, that silent wood-cutter which forms a part of every up-to-date burglar's kit.

He had been right. Kupie had lost no time. What he intended to do with the girl he could only surmise.

"They didn't want to harm you here, otherwise they would have shot through the panel," he said. "They could have got you easily."

"Then what do you think they wanted?" asked the girl.

"To take you away somewhere, to hold you as a hostage to—by gosh! I've got it! You were going to be the bait to bring Rex into the open!"

The inspiration flashed upon him at that moment, and he was convinced he was right. Kupie's desperation was growing as the hours passed, and Kupie's desperation had to do with Rex Walton's disappearance.

The day was dawning when he went home, this time leaving two officers inside the house. He knew that Kupie had not played his last card.

CHAPTER XXXII

THIS last and most audacious outrage was by no means destined to be the final effort of the mysterious agencies against which the police were fighting. It seemed as if the attempt to capture Joan marked the beginning of a new campaign of terror, for the events which followed quick upon one another were as daring as, in some cases, they were inexplicable.

The days that followed were days of intense mental strain to Jimmy Sepping. In that time he did not see any of the other actors in this strange and terrible drama which was being enacted in the very heart of London, but he kept himself informed by telephone of Dora's condition, and on the morning of the second day he had the dubious satisfaction of learning that she was well enough to get up, and that she was going down to Marlow that day.

The first hearings of the inquests upon Parker and Lawford Collett were to be formal, the police having asked for a fortnight's adjournment in order to procure fresh evidence.

"Which means," said Jimmy, "any evidence at all!"

"By the way, I've had a Kupie letter," said Dicker, "telling me to keep out of the case—the same paper, but not the same handwriting.

I suppose you've had a similarly friendly warning ?"

Jimmy laughed quietly.

"So long ago that I'd almost forgotten that I had it," he said. "I think that will be the only kind of letter that Kupie will write."

"You mean that he's dropped his 'blacking' ? Very likely you're correct," said Dicker thoughtfully. "But it would be unwise to prophesy what move he will make next."

In the afternoon occurred an incident, trivial in itself, yet, to Jimmy's mind, associated with the more serious crimes which had been committed in the name of Kupie. The woman who acted as housekeeper to Mr. Coleman had taken down the curtains in the bedroom where the murder was committed, and having packed these in a box with other articles which needed cleaning, had telephoned to a Chiswick firm of cleaners to collect them. At half-past four the collecting van, a small Ford lorry, called at Portland Place. The man carried out the box, put it in the van, and continued on his round. Eventually he reached Richmond, where the last of his calls was to be made. Ordinarily he had a small boy, who acted as van guard, but the lad had been sent to pick up a parcel from a house on Richmond Terrace, what time the driver was collecting a box from an hotel. On the arrival of the van at Twickenham one of the boxes was found to be missing, and, on checking his list, the driver discovered that it was Mr. Coleman's.

A complaint was made to the Richmond police, and on inquiry the local officers learnt that a man had seen a car drive up behind the cleaners' lorry ; the driver had descended, jumped into the van, and presently had come back with a box, which he had handed to a second man, described by the witness as looking like a sailor; then the car had driven off. When the driver of the lorry was interviewed he remembered that, all the way from London, he had been shadowed by a large Spanz car.

This incident in itself might have been passed over as being without importance, for no day passes that does not bring its full crop of larcenies, though small thieves do not as a rule tour the country in a big limousine. But on the following morning Mr. Coleman's butler, Bennett, dispatched a box to Marlow. It contained the books for which Dora had telephoned, her little library. These Bennett had packed in a small sugar-case, and, putting them on a taxi, had taken them to the Great Western station and had paid for their transmission by passenger train to Marlow. Apparently the case was transferred at Maidenhead to the branch train, and had been left standing, with other baggage, on the platform. It was then put into the guard's van of the local train and was again transferred at Bourne End. This time it was placed in an empty van at the far end of the train. On arriving at Marlow, a very short distance, the guard went to the van to get out the case, and, to his amazement, found that the box had been broken open; the books were thrown out on to the floor, except a few which remained at the bottom of the box. Again evidence was forthcoming. A platelayer had seen somebody, whom he described as a middle-aged man in spectacles, climbing along the footboard towards the luggage van, when the train was about a mile out of Bourne End.

The third incident was more serious, and it was this which was reported to Scotland Yard. Mr. Coleman had ordered his butler to take a small grip, containing a change of clothes, sleeping-suit and shaving materials, to the baggage office at Paddington, in preparation for the week-end visit which he was paying to his country house. The car was at Marlow, and Bennett, who was an athletic man, decided to walk to the station. The bag was not heavy and it was a beautiful night. Dusk had fallen, though the afterglow of the sunset still lingered in the sky, and there were very few people about, because it was the hour when the pleasure-seekers were still in the theatres.

At the top of Portland Place is a crescent-shaped garden railed off from the road, and the private property of the residents of Portland Crescent. He had crossed the road, and was walking parallel with the railings of the garden, abreast of the gate which gives access to these private grounds, when it was opened, the bag was snatched from him and a sponge soaked in ammonia was thrown in his face. The fumes of the ammonia paralysed him momentarily, and when he recovered and found a policeman his assailant had gone.

There was little doubt that he had been shadowed and that the robbery had been carefully planned. The man who had attacked him had been lying in wait in the garden, and probably, if Bennett had not crossed the road, the stranger in ambush would have come out to meet him.

The bag was afterwards found in the garden, with its contents scattered about the green lawn. Jimmy, his curiosity aroused, called on Mr. Coleman, who was still at the hotel, but spent most of his evenings at the house.

"I can't understand it," said Mr. Coleman peevishly. "And really, I'm tired of complaining to the police."

"Was there anything of value in the bag?"

"Nothing at all," said Mr. Coleman emphatically. "Nothing!"

"It is extraordinary," said Jimmy, for the *n*th time since he had come into this remarkable case. "I have never known thieves so capricious. Your man wouldn't be able to identify the fellow who attacked him?"

Mr. Coleman shook his head.

Jim saw the bag and its contents, and certainly there was nothing in Mr. Coleman's wardrobe which would tempt even the most desperate of thieves.

On top of these occurrences he received an unexpected visit from Joan. That morning she had received a letter bearing the Marlow postmark. She recognised the handwriting; it was from Dora.

> *My dear girl* (it ran), *won't you come down and stay with me and clear my mind of horrors? This is a beautiful little place, very quiet and very dull. The house is on a backwater, with a glimpse of the real river from my window, and we have a beautiful little electric launch. Doesn't that appeal to you? Also, father has engaged two stalwart gardeners to keep Kupie at bay. That, I think, will make even a greater appeal. I am trying to forget poor Lawford's death and the shocking end of Parker. It is difficult. Father will probably come for week-ends, but I will be tactful and prevent his boring you with abstract economics. Do come, please!*

Jimmy's face fell when he read the letter.

"I hate your going there," he said, "and I feel I'm a brute in making the suggestion, but it is going to be very difficult to look after you. Whilst you are in the Metropolitan area I can assure your safety; but once you pass into the area of the Buckinghamshire police it is going to be difficult."

She was disappointed and a little stubborn.

"I've got to get away from London," she said. "The house is on my nerves."

Jimmy recognised the force of her argument.

"Besides," she said, "Dora has her 'two stalwart gardeners,' and there's no danger at all for me. Please, may I go?"

Jimmy had unconsciously assumed the position of guardian and confidential adviser, a rôle which was not altogether displeasing.

"I suppose you may," he said reluctantly, "though you're going to add to my anxieties. No, I don't mean that," he said hastily when he saw the look in her face. "I'm being selfish. Go along; I think Dora will be glad to have you with her."

"Riverside" was a stone and wooden bungalow, set on the reed-grown banks of a little backwater. It was not actually in Marlow, being a mile from the town itself, and this, from Joan's point of view, was all to the good. Dora met her at the station, and she was looking better than Joan had expected They made their way across the old bridge and turned down the long country lane which led to "Riverside."

The bungalow—for it was no more—was hidden from the road behind a belt of pines. The house was prettily furnished, the rooms airy and light. Joan sank into a deep cane chair in her big bedroom, fragrant with the aroma of early mignonette; and for the first time for many weeks felt at peace. A French window gave on to a little balcony over the porch, and this was lined with window-boxes. She looked down at the two supporting pillars, and it occurred to her how much easier it would be to escape than it was from her bedroom in Cadogan Place. She laughed softly at the absurd thought.

"Nerves, my dear," she said.

After she had changed she joined Dora on the lawn sloping down to the backwater. A long and narrow island running parallel with the bank shut out the view of the river, except beyond the eastern end of the island.

"Here is the boat-house. It isn't really a boat-house at all," she smiled. "It is just a roof over water. And here is the launch; I'll show you how to drive her."

For an hour the visitor was immersed in the technique of electrical craft. Dora had thrown off her gloom and was her old, bright self, and neither she nor her guest made any reference to the tragedy until they sat in the big common room after dinner. The night was chilly, and a small log fire burnt in the open hearth.

"Did I ever tell you that Lawford wanted to marry me?" asked Dora unexpectedly. A smouldering cigarette was between her white fingers, and her beautiful eyes gazed abstractedly at the fire.

"How many people have wanted to marry you?" asked Joan, and was a little shocked at her own crudeness.

"Oh, a lot of people," said Dora vaguely. "Some men ask you to marry them with the same readiness as I would ask you to dinner. The matrimonial habit is very strong in a certain type of man! Your experience must have also commenced."

She turned her eyes to the girl, and Joan flushed.

"No, nobody has ever proposed to me yet," she said.

"I think Jimmy will one day," said Dora quietly, and Joan turned the subject.

"Why do you speak of Lawford ?"

"I was thinking of him," replied Dora absently. "I liked Lawford. I could never have married him, but there was a lot that was very fine about him. Joan, do you know the most terrible experience any human being could have ?"

Joan shook her head.

"It is to be tied to your hobby," said the girl, "and to be forced into continuing your play. At first it is all very delightful and thrilling, but there comes a time when you just want to drop playing. And then you find you're chained. Oh, the burden and weariness of it !"

Joan stared at her in amazement.

"Your mind works off at a tangent, Dora. What were you thinking about then ?"

"Oh, just thinking," said Dora, throwing her cigarette into the fire-place and rising abruptly.

But Joan was not to be put off.

"Whom were you playing with ? You weren't playing with Rex ? You were serious there, Dora ?"

The girl nodded slowly.

"Yes, I was serious there. I didn't know how serious until——"

Again her wayward mood was expressed in the sudden change of subject.

"Do you remember the girl Rex was going to marry before—you know ? Edith . . . I don't know her name."

"Yes, she was murdered," said Joan. "I say 'murdered,' I think advisedly, because it was wicked to write to her, as this dreadful Kupie did, and tell her that her secret was known. Poor Edie !"

"Poor Edie!" repeated the other almost mechanically. "Poor Lawford! . . . Poor Parker! . . Victims of insatiable greed."

"Kupie's?"

Dora sighed.

"I don't know," she said shortly.

And then the girl asked her a question that had often been in her mind.

"What was your school, Dora?"

"I never went to school," was the surprising answer, "not after I was ten. I am entirely self-educated; that will amuse you, remembering what a dunce I am. I think education, so far as a woman is concerned, begins and ends with the ability to express herself in neat handwriting. I suppose there are some other accomplishments necessary, but one picks them up as one goes along. The China of the geography books isn't the China that you see in the early morning, when the sea is alive with *sampans* and the sun is shining on the white houses and the green trees of the beach. And history only becomes real the first time you go into Westminster Abbey."

"But surely your father——"

Dora shook her head.

"Father hasn't always been rich," she said. "He wasn't always as interested in me as he is to-day," she added with a little smile. "Joan, you must go to bed, and you can sleep soundly, because nobody will try to break into your room—I'm sorry you had that ghastly experience."

Joan had told her what had happened in Cadogan Place.

She slept as well that night as Dora could have wished, and woke to find Dora's maid arranging a dainty china tea-service by the side of her bed.

"Miss Coleman has gone on the river, madam," said the woman. "She said you were not to be wakened until ten o'clock."

"Is it ten o'clock?" said Joan, sitting up with a gasp.

When she went out on to the lawn Dora was pulling to the little quay with long, slow, steady strokes. She shipped her oars and jumped lightly to land.

"If you'd been up we would have had a swim," she said, but Joan was staring at her.

"What is the matter with your face?" she asked.

The fair skin of the girl flushed.

"Nothing very much," she said, and the mark Joan had seen was emphasised. "I went ashore on one of the little islands and stumbled."

Joan did not question her further. But she knew that the bruise on Dora Coleman's face was not due to a fall. For as the colour had come to her cheeks, the finger-marks of a blow struck with an open hand were unmistakable.

CHAPTER XXXIII

JOAN made no further reference to the blow on the girl's face, but strolled round the bay to avoid even looking at her. Outwardly, at any rate, Dora was unchanged. They went together in the launch to Henley, had tea, and came back in the dusk of the evening, just in time for dinner. When she did eventually steal a glance at the tell-tale mark, she noticed that Dora had used powder lavishly—which was not like Dora.

"Father will be coming down to-morrow or the next day," she said when they were again on the comfortable settee before the fire. "He telephoned me this afternoon. Your Jimmy and that big man—what is his name, Dicker?—have been bothering him with questions. It is all very necessary—I realise that—but poor old daddy so easily gets worried."

As the evening progressed her pretence of cheerfulness gradually wore thin. She was nervous, started at the slightest sound. Joan detected her once, her head bent in a listening attitude, and asked her what she was hearing.

"I think it is the river. It takes me a week to get used to the sound of water," she said. "I'm afraid I'm not the brilliant conversationalist I pretend to be," she added with a rueful laugh.

Joan got a book and tried to read, and her hostess followed her example. But if the printed page was meaningless to Joan, it was a blank to her companion. She shot a sidelong glance at the girl, and was shocked to see how haggard she looked. Perhaps it was a trick of the light, but it appeared to Joan that, of a sudden, a great fear had descended upon Dora Coleman. Her eyes stared unseeingly at the fire; she held the closed book in her tightly-clenched fingers; her lips were parted; her breath was coming quickly.

"What is the matter?" asked Joan in alarm, and the girl woke with a little grimace as from an unpleasant dream.

"I don't know. I was thinking," she said. "Come up to my room, will you, Joan?"

She got up and linked her arm in the girl's.

"Nerves," she said as they went slowly up the stairs. "All this excitement is very bad for a young and susceptible female—a description which fits you as well as it fits me."

She led Joan into her own bedroom. It was more simply furnished than that which she had given to her guest. There was a big writing-table against the wall between the windows, and to this she went, first pulling down the blinds and drawing the curtains. Opening the drawer, her hand disappeared to the back, and came out holding a short-barrelled Browning pistol.

"Have you ever used one of these?" she asked with affected carelessness.

Joan nodded.

"Yes; Rex taught me to shoot when I was quite a little girl—why?"

Dora pulled back the jacket of the weapon and slid it back again, satisfied.

"There's a cartridge in the chamber, and I think there are nine in the magazine," she said. "You know how to work the safety catch? I have put it up now."

"But what on earth——?" began Joan.

"Just nerves. I feel that you're ever so much more capable than I am to-night—that is why I am lending you my little guardian angel. Come along."

Her arm about the girl's shoulder, they passed into Joan's bedroom, and again it was the hostess who pulled down the blinds and drew the curtains.

"There is excellent ventilation in this room, so, unless you're a fresh-air fiend, you need not open the windows. In fact, I think I should keep them fastened," she said.

"But why ever?" asked Joan quickly. "Is anything wrong?"

Dora shook her head.

"I don't know that anything is wrong, except everything," she said inconsistently. "I am nervous, and it will calm me to know that there is at least one person in the house who isn't liable, on the slightest excuse, to dissolve into hysterics."

She put the revolver on the dressing-table.

"And now good night, dear." She kissed the girl affectionately. "Lock your door, because—well, I believe in locking doors, don't you? Servants have a trick of coming in at the most inconvenient moments," she added a little lamely.

Joan saw her to the door and closed it, and then, after a second of indecision, turned the key in the lock.

Left alone, she sat down to puzzle out Dora's curious attitude. Did she really believe that that hideous experience in Cadogan Place would be repeated? She took up the pistol and looked at it curiously. She had never thought of Dora as the owner of a weapon of this character. She was so gentle, so unaggressive, so far removed from the crude violence of life. Yet, in a way, the possession of this weapon brought her an extraordinary sense of security. She placed it on the table by the side of her bed, and laughed softly at the melodramatic situation.

Five minutes after getting into bed she was asleep, and she did not wake again until a foot touched one of the legs of the bed. The jar brought her to instant wakefulness, and she sat up. The room was in thick darkness; she could see nothing. Only she knew that somebody was in the room; she could hear their quiet breathing.

For a second or so a curious icy sensation ran down her spine, and then she remembered the Browning, and stretched out her hand. It was there, and her fingers closed on the butt.

"Don't strike a light, or you'll be sorry," said a deep voice at the foot of the bed.

"Who are you?" she asked.

"Get up. I want you," said the voice again, and in the desperation of fear she thumbed down the safety catch and gripped the trigger convulsively.

Two shots rang out almost as one. She heard the splintering of glass and a smothered cry of fear from the man. In another second she had sprung from her bed, torn aside the curtains, and flung open the French windows that led to the balcony.

She did not know what she was doing; in her heart was a horror that was inexpressible in words a horror that drowned all reason. She turned, facing the window, her pistol levelled.

"I will kill you if you come near me," she breathed.

Then, in a flash, she was over the parapet and was scrambling down the wooden pillar. Her hands were cut with splinters and bleeding, but she kept tight hold of her pistol.

Which way should she go? She might have waited in the room until assistance arrived, but she dared not remain another second in that awful presence.

Marlow was a mile away. It was still dark, though the east was lightening. And then she remembered the launch, and fled, bare-footed, across the lawn to the boat-shed. With a sinking of heart she realised that the mooring chain was padlocked. She jumped into the boat, her eye all the time searching the black lawn for a sign of the pursuer; though she guessed that her assailant would not take the risk of coming into the open against a frenzied girl armed with an automatic pistol.

She tugged at the chain and the padlock gave At first she thought a miracle had happened; then she remembered that it had been her task to fasten the launch when they came back from Henley, and that she had forgotten to ask for the key. As the chain fell into the water with a splash, she pulled back the lever and the tiny propeller began to revolve. She was in midstream, and the high bank afforded a skyline. As she turned to bring the nose of the boat to the river, she saw two figures, moving on hands and knees toward the boat-shed. She recognised the first as one of the "stalwart gardeners." The men must have heard the sound of the propeller, for somebody hissed:

"Come back! We will do you no harm."

And then . . . "*Plop!*"

She saw a flash, and the wind of the bullet lifted the hair on her forehead. But there was no explosion, only a soft, thud-like sound. She pushed over the lever again, and turned the wheel to bring the boat into the shadow of the island bank. Once its side grated against the shallow bottom, and she thought she had gone aground.

They were coming after her. She heard the thump of rowlocks, and her boat was moving none too fast. The batteries were running out! Dora had told her that they must be recharged in the morning.

Through a tangle of reeds she came to the open river and swung downstream, the propeller working tiredly. If she could meet the river police—but perhaps there were no river police here. And farther down was a lock; they would catch up with her, she realised with a gasp of horror. But where there was a lock there was a lock-keeper. That thought comforted her, and the knowledge that in her hand there were eight spheres of death.

Nearer and nearer came the boat, and then . . . "*Crash!*"

She was thrown forward on to her face. In her anxiety she had not kept too vigilant an outlook, and she had collided with some obstacle in the river. When she recovered her scattered senses she found herself lying in two inches of water, for the launch had holed. The pursuing boat was near She felt round for her pistol, which had been put upon the seat by her side, and with a gasp of dismay touched nothing. She searched wildly; it had disappeared—probably had been thrown overboard in the shock of the collision.

Ahead of her was the dark stern of a barge, and the current was carrying the sinking boat toward it. She gripped the low gunwale.

"Now, Miss Joan Walton!" cried the exultant voice of one of the rowers, and a hand gripped her arm. . . .

CHAPTER XXXIV

"KNOWLES has been seen in town," said Dicker, coming unceremoniously into Jimmy's office on the previous evening, just as he was packing his papers preparatory to going home.

"Who saw him?" asked Jimmy.

"One of our men spotted him half an hour ago, crossing Coventry Street. He started off to overtake him, but missed him in the crowd. We may be attaching too much importance to Nippy," said Dicker thoughtfully. "In all probability it is guilty conscience that is keeping him away. Lately there have been one or two burglaries that looked like his work, though they hadn't quite the artistic finish which Nippy puts into his best jobs. What about those men you wanted for Marlow? The Commissioner doesn't like sending out of London unless there's a very special necessity. I've had a talk with the Buckinghamshire police, and they're quite willing to put a plain-clothes man on duty at 'Riverside' if you want him."

Jimmy hesitated. It would be all over Marlow if it was known, as it would be known, that "Riverside" was watched.

"I will make private arrangements to-morrow."

He did not specify what those private arrangements would be, and Dicker did not ask. Before

Jimmy went to bed that night he received the report that no further trace of the elusive Mr. Knowles (in whose fate Albert displayed an inordinate interest) had been found.

"Maybe he's hiding away from something, sir," suggested Albert as he brought up Jimmy's nightcap.

"That is Mr. Dicker's view too," said Jimmy.

"I don't mean that he's hiding from the police," said Albert earnestly. "He always struck me as being a very genuine sort of man, and when he told me he was giving up burgling——"

"They all tell you that, Albert," said Jimmy, finishing his whisky. "Repentance is part of a burglar's stock-in-trade. I want to be up at five to-morrow. Set your alarm clock."

Jimmy invariably rose early under normal conditions. He found he could work best before the interruptions of the day started; and he was at his desk, writing out reports that had been called for, when the telephone at his elbow signalled urgently.

"Don't tell me anybody else has been killed," said Jimmy, recognising the night inspector's voice.

"No, sir, no killing—only a burglary. Mr. Coleman's house was broken into last night."

Jimmy hung up the receiver and laughed helplessly.

Bill Dicker was in Mr. Coleman's study, talking to him, when Jimmy arrived; and it was evident, from the appearance of the Treasury official, that he also had dressed hurriedly, for he wore his oldest suit, and about his neck, in place of the immaculate collar and cravat, was a gaudy silk handkerchief. But what struck Jimmy immediately about the little man was the intense pallor of his face—a pallor relieved only by the red weal with which his unknown assailant had marked him.

"Here's a curious thing, Jimmy," said Dicker as he came in.

"Have they got away with much?" asked Jimmy.

"They've got away with nothing," said Dicker calmly; "and that's one of the minor curiosities. The house was burgled by an expert, all the alarms cut—and you know what skill that requires—three locks forced, another cut out, and yet the bedrooms have not been visited."

"But where on earth did he search?" asked Jimmy in surprise.

"The kitchen," was the startling reply.

"The kitchen?" repeated Jimmy with a frown. "That's queer. That is two kitchens have been burgled in one week!"

Bennett's version of the affair made the matter all the more puzzling. He had slept alone in the house all night, Mr. Coleman having taken up his residence at the hotel, the remainder of the servants sleeping out as usual. Bennett had heard nothing, and knew nothing, until he heard somebody walking down the stairs, and, coming out—he had slept that night in a small room on the ground floor—had challenged the intruder, only to discover that it was a policeman who had seen the door wide open as he passed and had come in, and, failing to arouse even Bennett, had gone up the stairs to see if there was anybody else in the house. The front door had been forced, and here was a coincidence which Jimmy remarked upon, though it proved to have little importance; for neither the door of Joan's house nor of Mr. Coleman's had been bolted or chained. The intruder had got in with little or no trouble, and had made his way through the drawing-room into the servants' hall, either forcing or cutting out the locks as he went. From the servants' hall be left no trail; apparently that uninteresting region was his objective. At any rate, they could not trace him any farther.

After the first rapid inspection, Bill Dicker took Jimmy's arm and led him out into the street.

"What strikes you as the most remarkable fact about this burglary, Jimmy?"

"There are one or two," replied Jimmy. "The first is, that Bennett did not hear the policeman when he was standing at the foot of the stairs shouting out 'Is anybody here?"

Bill nodded.

"You've got it first time," he said. "Bennett says that it was the shouting of the policeman that wakened him. Either Bennett's scared or else he is a liar. He must have heard the policeman before."

"I'll bet any money that he wasn't scared," said Jimmy. "He's not that kind of man."

"Then he was drugged," said Dicker. "And in support of the drugging theory, there is his statement that he had never found it so difficult to wake up, and that he heard the policeman like a man in a dream, and yet had not been able to move or speak when the officer shouted."

"Did he take any drink with strangers last night?"

"I have asked him that," said Bill. "He said he had had nothing except a cup of coffee before he went to bed, and he remembers that it tasted unusually bitter. He was the only person in the house, and yet——"

"And yet," finished Jimmy, "if he was drugged, why did not the burglars go into his room and relieve him of his keys? It would have saved them a great deal of trouble."

Bill nodded.

"That was another point that occurred to me," he said. "Jimmy, this burglary is the work of a craftsman. Old man Coleman is of course convinced that it was the same fellow who broke into the house before, but that is a theory to which I cannot subscribe. The first man was an amateur; this is a professional, and of a high order of intelligence. Notice how cleanly he has worked when it was necessary to cut out a lock. It has taken some time, too."

When the sun came up, and the light was much more suitable for a closer examination, the two men concluded their search, and in course of time came to the larder, with its stone trap.

"Nothing to steal here, unless he's taken your wine, Mr. Coleman," said Bill Dicker good-humouredly.

Stooping to pull up the trap, he threw down a light from his torch.

"It's gone," he said suddenly.

"Gone?" repeated Coleman in a tone of horror "Gone, you say?"

Bill did not reply, but reached out his foot for the ladder and descended. In a little while he came back.

"You've lost your '58 port, Mr. Coleman, unless you've sent it back to its rightful owner."

Coleman shook his head. His face was now ghastly grey; the fingers which he brought up to his trembling lips were beyond his control. Twice, three times he tried to speak, but his voice failed him. And then:

"Gone? The wine has gone?" he quavered. "Oh, my God, you don't mean that!"

Jimmy was looking at him with narrowed eyes.

"Why, what is there in the loss of the wine to hurt you?" he asked softly.

"It—didn't belong to me," the man jerked out. "It didn't belong to me," he moaned, and Jimmy thought that the trouble through which this pompous man had passed must have turned his brain.

CHAPTER XXXV

HE looked round; they were alone. Bennett had gone back to his room to find a key that Dicker had asked for. By an extreme effort of will, Mr. Coleman regained some of his old self-possession.

"Things like that annoy me," he said. "Losing other people's property . . . I ought to have returned it when you told me. . . ."

"Yes, I think so. Are you sure it is gone?"

Dicker flashed his lamp into the hole suggestively, and, going on his knees, Mr. Coleman peered down. He was there for a long time, and when he arose there was a look in his eyes which Jimmy could not understand.

"Yes, it is gone," said Coleman in a quiet voice, and looked round helplessly.

For the second time that week the house was searched from garret to cellar, but nothing further was missing. Not so much as a silver spoon had been stolen by the midnight burglars. Jimmy paused for a little while in Dora's bedroom. The brown stain still showed on the floor, and so rapidly had events moved that it was almost impossible to believe that it was only a few days ago that Parker had lost his life. And Kupie was the murderer! Kupie or one of his satellites.

The words of little Nippy Knowles came back to him—Tod Haydn, the iron-willed and the iron-handed—he was the force behind this gang of desperate men. Tod Haydn! To get him was to destroy for ever the power for evil which this organisation had wielded with such ruthlessness.

He was preparing to leave the house when Mr. Coleman joined him.

"Do you mind if I come out with you?" he almost pleaded. "This place gets on my nerves. I think, if I stayed here any longer, I should go mad. Poor Parker! . . . poor Collett! . . ."

"Why do you connect the two?" asked Dicker sharply.

"What else can I do?" In his anguish the little man wrung his hands. "Didn't I know them both? Weren't they one a guest and the other a servant of mine? Wasn't Parker killed in my house, and did not Collett himself go out from there to his death? Where are you going?" he asked.

Jim looked at his watch. It was a quarter past six.

"I ought to go to bed, but I'm going to Scotland Yard," he said.

"And you, Mr. Dicker?"

Bill Dicker shook his head.

"No, I've got some work to do, and I was sleeping practically the whole of yesterday afternoon."

"Would you mind, Mr.—I mean Captain—Sepping, if I came with you?"

"To Scotland Yard?" said Jimmy in surprise. "No, I don't mind at all, if you would like to go."

"Yes, sir, I should. There's something I'd like to tell you." He looked round nervously. "Yes there's something I'd like to tell you," he said again.

"Very well," said Jimmy good-humouredly. "Come along."

They walked through Langham Place into Regent Street, strolled down that unique thoroughfare, unhampered by the pedestrians who, a few hours later, would be crowding the broad sidewalk. There was a sprinkling of people about at that hour; the market carts were returning, and the usual early workers were hurrying to their places of business.

"You may think it is remarkable," said Mr. Coleman, "that I should have made such an exhibition of myself; a public official has natural——"

Suddenly he stopped short, and all the pathetic pompousness in his voice died away.

"I'm talking like a fool," he said brokenly, "Just like a fool!"

He spoke no more till they were crossing Piccadilly Circus into Haymarket. And then, as they were descending the slope toward Cockspur Street, the staccato explosion of a motor-bicycle coming from behind made him look round suddenly. It was the loudest motor-bicycle that Jimmy had ever heard, and he, too, turned to see a man in a yellow leather jacket, a closely fitting helmet and a pair of large goggles, coming at speed toward them.

"A noisy fellow that," said Jimmy, and then Mr. Coleman leant towards him and would have fallen had not his companion caught him in his arms.

"Got it . . . !" he said thickly.

Jimmy jerked him upright.

"Hold up," he said. "What is the matter with you?"

But the man in his arms did not answer. He thought at first the man had fainted, and carrying him to a recessed doorway, put him down on the step. A policeman on point duty had seen the collapse and came striding across the road.

"I think he has fainted," said Jimmy.

"Oh!" said the policeman suspiciously. "Who is he?"

"He is Mr. Coleman, and I am Detective-Inspector Sepping, of head-quarters," said Jimmy, and the officer's tone changed.

"There's an all-night chemist's shop open a few doors up. Shall we get him in there, sir?"

Jimmy was stooping to lift the unconscious man when he saw a red stain creeping along the man's neck.

"He's wounded," he said, and pulled aside the coat.

The bullet had struck Coleman a little above the heart, and he was bleeding desperately. They picked him up and carried him into the chemist's shop, but from the first Jimmy knew that the case was hopeless, and Coleman died a quarter of an hour later as the ambulance was turning into the entrance of Charing Cross Hospital.

He hurried back to the scene of the shooting, and found a policeman keeping at a respectful distance the crowd that had gathered even at that early hour.

"There were two or three shots fired. Look at those, sir." He pointed to two punctures that had been driven into the wooden-fronted shop. They were within an inch of one another. "An automatic pistol, I should say," said the policeman. "I didn't hear any shot, either."

"Did you hear the motor-bicycle?" said Jimmy.

"The man who was making such a noise? I nearly stopped him for riding without a silencer."

"He had a silencer," said Jimmy, "but it was on his automatic pistol."

CHAPTER XXXVI

HIS first thought, after his mind began to be normal, was of Dora. What effect would this new and greatest of all tragedies have upon the girl? She must be told, although the shock might kill her. He sent a message to all stations, ordering cyclist patrols to warn the men on duty to report the yellow motor-cyclist, and almost immediately he had news of the murderer. He had passed under the Admiralty Arch into Green Park, had been seen going up Constitutional Hill, and had turned into Hyde Park, moving in the direction of Knightsbridge. After that all trace of him was lost, until about seven o'clock in the morning, when the bicycle was found in a clump of rhododendron bushes, and with it the man's leather coat and hat. He himself had vanished.

Dicker saw the Treasury officials, and was surprised to learn how small and unimportant a position the late Mr. Coleman held.

"He was a clerk," said the chief of his department, and mentioned a sum which left Dicker speechless by its inadequacy. "I was always under the impression that he had money of his own," said the official, "and was working at the Treasury as a hobby. He was a very inoffensive man, and I suppose he was able to maintain the pretence that he occupied a very prominent position, from the fact that he had a little room to himself and was not brought into contact with other members of the staff. At any rate," he said with a smile, " the other clerks would not have given him away, and probably some of them practise the same deceit. He had no enemies, as far as I know. Indeed, I know very little about his private life, though several times I have thought it curious that he should find his very dull work as amusing as he did."

" When did he come to you ? "

" During the war," was the reply. " We were rather short of men, and at that time he occupied a more important position than he has since the Armistice."

When Dicker reached Portland Place he found that the news of Coleman's death had travelled before him. He was met by the troubled chauffeur-butler and shown into the drawing-room.

" This is terrible, sir," he almost wailed. " First Mr. Parker—I never think of him except as Mr. Parker ; then poor Mr. Collett ; now my poor master ! "

Dicker took possession of the dead man's papers, and when Jimmy Sepping came back from a hasty breakfast at his club he found Bennett waiting for him with a large sealed envelope in his hand.

" These are poor Mr. Coleman's documents," he said. " Mr. Dicker said I was to bring them to you, and to tell you that he thinks he has found Kupie."

" Oh ! " said the startled Jimmy. " Where has Mr. Dicker gone ? "

" He's catching the eight-thirty for Northampton—at least, he told me so," said Bennett with a half-smile. " I don't know whether Mr. Dicker would give away information to an outsider, and probably you know where he has gone. Mr. Sepping, what am I to do ? I am simply distracted with worry. Poor Miss Coleman ! . . ."

" Does she know ? " asked Jimmy, and Bennett shook his head.

" Who do you think is Kupie, sir ? I've got my own theory," he said earnestly. " Probably you'd think I was mad or spiteful if I told you."

" Who do you think ? " asked Jimmy.

" I have an idea it is Mr. Walton himself," said the man doggedly, " and so did Mr. Coleman. I once heard him raving about Mr. Walton to Miss Dora. He as good as said that, if he could tell everything he knew, the police would be looking for Mr. Walton to jail him—not to rescue him."

" You can dismiss that idea from your mind, Bennett," said Jimmy sternly. " Mr. Walton is no more a criminal than I am." And, seeing that the man was not convinced, he went on good-naturedly : " We suspect everybody now, Bennett. Mr. Dicker even suspected poor Mr. Coleman. I don't know what you ought to do. I think you'd better remain at the house until Miss Walton is able to decide where she is going. I will go down to Marlow and see her. By the way, did Mr. Coleman ever say any more about Mr. Walton ? "

The man hesitated.

" No, sir ; he made one or two rather unpleasant remarks, which I don't want to repeat, but, then, he suspected a lot of people. One of his ideas was that Kupie was somebody at head-quarters, somebody who had access to all the information that would turn up about crimes and criminals, the very stuff that a blackmailer would give his head to know."

Jimmy had one of his fantastic brain-waves, and acted on it.

"Did Mr. Coleman ever talk about Tod Haydn?" he asked.

"Tod Haydn?" repeated the other. "No, sir, I don't remember the name. But, then, I wasn't on what you might call speaking terms with the family until I took over poor Parker's job. Mr. Coleman had his limousine, and as I drove outside I had no chance of discussing things with him, and he was not the sort of man who would tell you much about his private affairs."

As Bennett went out of the office a clerk brought him a telegram. Jimmy placed it by the side of his pad whilst he finished the work he was doing. When it was completed he opened the wire leisurely, thinking it was one of the innumerable telegraphic reports that came to him in his official capacity.

> *Come to Marlow immediately. Joan has gone. Dora. Please send a policeman or get somebody to break in the door.*

He stared at the message, trying to make head or tail of it.

Fetch a policeman? Why did she send that message? Was it a joke? There was an air of urgency about the summons that was not to be denied.

Joan gone!

He went pale at the thought of all that those very simple words might mean. As he came flying out into the courtyard, one of the assistant-commissioners drove up in his car, and in a few words Jimmy explained what he required.

"Certainly. Take the car, Jimmy," was the instant reply, and in a few seconds he was speeding toward Chelsea. He went through Maidenhead at a speed which transgressed all regulations, and, clear of the town, the car fairly flew up Quarry Hill and down the narrow winding road into Marlow.

There was nothing about the house that seemed in any way remarkable, except that when he knocked there came no reply. Dora had told him once that the servants were local girls, who lived in the town. Apparently they had not been admitted either. He found the kitchen door bolted and barred.

Returning to the front of the house, he saw an open French window leading on to the small balcony that formed the roof of the porch, and without hesitation he jumped up and, gripping the pillar with his knees, drew himself to the level of the rail. Going through the open window he found himself in a woman's bedroom; the bed had been slept in. Moreover, the clothes of the occupant lay neatly folded across the back of a chair. A second window was smashed and the mirror in a long wardrobe was splintered, obviously by a bullet. All this he saw at a glance. Jimmy's heart thumped painfully. It was Joan's room! He recognised her bag on the table.

The door was open, and he went out on to the landing and tried another door. He was in a small bedroom, and guessed, from certain indications, that this was Coleman's own. The bed had not been slept in, as he well knew.

The third door was locked. He shook it, and a weak voice called him. Stepping back, he brought his foot against the lock, and the flimsy door crashed open.

It was another bedroom, but he did not look at the disordered furniture, or note anything save the woman who was crouching by the window. Her hands were tied tightly together, and a rope passed round her arms locked her elbows painfully.

Jimmy looked at her, speechless. Was this girl with the red eyes and the bruised face Dora Coleman? She looked up at him piteously; her pale lips moved, but she uttered no sound; and then, recovering from his paralysis, Jimmy lifted her tenderly and laid her on the bed. His knife cut the bonds about her arms and ankles, and as the last strand was severed she collapsed with a groan of pain, and for a while Jimmy thought she was dying.

He knew it was useless going to the telephone, but he tried, only to find, as he had expected, that Kupie had been to work with his usual thoroughness.

In the dining-room he found a bottle of brandy, and bringing it upstairs, rubbed her numbed arms and bathed her forehead, until presently she recovered consciousness.

" Where is Joan ? " he asked.

She shook her head wearily.

" I don't know. I did my best, Jimmy," she muttered. " I did my very best! She fired at them. I think she escaped, because he came back and beat me. Oh, my God!"

" Who beat you ? "

She shook her head.

" Tod Haydn ? "

For an instant he saw a spark in her eyes, but it faded away again.

" You don't know Tod Haydn," she said, and then, " What is the use ? "

" Dora, tell me what this man is to you."

She shook her head again.

" Nothing," she said bitterly, " nothing but my master. And Coleman's master. Poor Coleman! They will kill him ! "

He could hardly believe the evidence of his ears.

" Was he your father ? " he asked.

" No ; he is no relation. Did they get him ? " she asked huskily, seeing the look in Jimmy's face, for her mind was moving more quickly now and she understood the significance of the word " was."

" Yes, they got him," said Jimmy quietly. " Who was it, Dora—is Dora your name ? "

" Dorothy Julia Coleman," she said wearily. " Yes, Coleman is my right name. I'm little Knowles's Julia. I thought you'd have guessed that long ago."

She asked for some water, and he went into Joan's room for the water-bottle. When he returned she was sitting up.

" Who is Tod Haydn ? " he asked.

" I can't tell you. You will have to find him without my help, Jimmy."

And she was adamant on that point. The old dictum of the crook world held—" Thou shalt not squeak ! " The man had struck her like the brute that he was, but she was faithful to the traditions of her class.

When she had recovered she told as much of the story as she knew. She was awakened by the shots, and had heard Tod say: "She has gone to the boat-house." After that she knew nothing.

"She probably took the launch," she said. "I told her how to work it, and I had at the back of my mind a fear that one day she might need the boat. What are you going to do with me?" she asked.

He shook his head.

"What can I do with you, Julia? You'll have to stand your trial, I suppose, for complicity in these murders."

He was shocked more than he had thought was possible for the most tremendous events in life to shock him.

"I know nothing about the murders," she said "Tod never took us into his confidence. He fixed everything. Coleman is dead—are you sure? Will you swear that?"

"I swear that," said Jimmy in surprise "Why?"

"Then I can tell you: he killed Parker, but he bungled it. So Tod said. Didn't you see the mark on Coleman's face? That was the whipping that Tod gave him."

"What was he to you?" asked Jim accusingly.

"Nothing," she repeated. "I am as good a woman now—in that way—as I was when I was a child. Tod was not a man who made love, or who wanted a wife. He is inhuman in some respects. I can't tell you any more, Jimmy—I suppose it is a great impertinence to call you Jimmy?" she said wistfully, and his heart went out to the poor victim of Tod Haydn—a cipher, a tool, a nothing to this man who did not care for the love of women and counted his conquests by the standard of solid cash.

"You'll have to get him quick, Jimmy, or he'll get you. After they came back he told me I had betrayed them and had given her the pistol. That was when he hit me. We met on the island by appointment yesterday morning, and he struck me then. Joan saw my face. Then early this morning the milk-boy came. I couldn't unfasten myself; I could only hobble inch by inch, but I managed to get to my writing-table and scrawled out a telegram."

A light dawned on Jimmy.

"At the end of the telegram you wrote a message to the boy, telling him to send for a policeman or get somebody to break into the house?"

She nodded.

"The boy evidently didn't read the telegram; he sent it off as it was. How did you get it to him?"

"I pushed it through the open window, with some money I took from my bag. I tried to speak to him, but he couldn't hear me—you see, the window was only open a little way."

Jimmy went out into the road in the hope of finding a messenger who could carry word to the Marlow police, and presently a cyclist came along by whom the detective dispatched a letter. He was talking to the girl, when the sound of heavy footsteps in the passage below told him that the police had arrived.

"Rightly or wrongly, Dora, I'm not going to mention your part in this conspiracy," he said. "You can tell them the story you have told me, but Tod will have to be a stranger—do you understand?—a burglar who broke in."

She nodded.

"You're very good to me," she said in a low voice. "Jimmy!"

He turned back from the door.

"I love Rex, that's all," she said with a quiver in her voice. "You needn't believe that—I don't expect you will. I was in the plot to swindle him, yet I loved him and love him still."

Jimmy went down the stairs in a very thoughtful frame of mind. He did not waste any more time than he could help. A car took him into Marlow town, and from there he sent out inquiries along the river, but no sign of a lady in a nightdress and dressing-gown had been seen. Perhaps she had got back to London. He called up her house, but nothing had been heard.

Frantic with fear, he chartered a steam-launch and went down the river, guessing that she would go with the stream, but he had not gone far before he came against a blank wall. The launch had been found to the west of Cookham Lock. It had been seen, lying at the bottom of the river, by an angler. Moreover, the lock-keeper had not been aroused in the night.

"If the lady was in difficulties she would certainly have come to me, sir," he said. "I was up most of the night with toothache; a light was in my window, and she couldn't have missed seeing it."

"What has passed through to-day?" asked Jimmy.

The lock-keeper recited a long string of craft, ranging from a coal-barge to a punt.

"*Molly*, of Wapping," he said, ticking them off on his finger; "*John Morton*, of Chelsea; the *Reliance*, of Greenwich; the *River Queen*, of Gravesend—that's a tug—and about four barges, up and down."

" You didn't have a covered launch through, or any other kind of craft in which a lady might have been concealed ? "

The lock-keeper shook his head.

" The *Dora* went through at seven," he said.

" The *Dora* ? " interrupted Jim quickly. " What is that ? "

" Oh, she's a barge," said the man, and Jimmy's hopes fell.

" Then the *Nancy* went through ten minutes later. Then the *Golden Heart* came up from Maidenhead."

Joan might have landed, and if this was the case his field of search was restricted. But none of the houses within miles of the river had been awakened in the night by a lady in scanty attire, and the afternoon wore on without his receiving any tidings of the lost girl.

Hollow-eyed, weary of soul and body, Jimmy returned to Scotland Yard to find a new demand upon his tired brain. He had hardly dropped into his chair when Inspector Levy came in.

" Where's Bill Dicker ? " he asked.

" I don't know," said Jimmy tiredly. " Oh, yes, he's gone to Northampton—to find Kupie. At least, that was the message he sent."

" Kupie be blowed ! Bill had a conference this afternoon, and he wouldn't miss that. Besides, he had two appointments at five. Who told you ? "

" The man who brought the papers—Bennett, Coleman's butler," said Jimmy. " He said that Dicker was going to Northampton by the eight-thirty."

" There isn't an eight-thirty to Northampton, and nobody knows that better than Dicker. There never has been an eight-thirty. There's one at a quarter-past nine. Dicker's hardly likely to make a mistake. Where was he last seen ?"

"In Coleman's house," said Jimmy, becoming suddenly wide awake.

He got up from the table, opened a drawer and dropped a gun into his pocket.

"I very seldom carry lethal weapons," he said, "but on this occasion I shall. Round up all the men you can lay hands on to surround Coleman's house—I'm going to arrest Tod Haydn, *alias* Bennett. And may I be kicked for a fool for not realising that Kupie and Haydn and Bennett are one and the same person!"

CHAPTER XXXVII

TAXICABS of all varieties and makes dropped a small army of detectives in Portland Place; and when the cordon had been completed, Jimmy knocked at the door. It was opened by a middle-aged woman servant.

"I think Mr. Bennett is in his room, sir. I'll call him."

"Don't trouble," said Jimmy, stepping in before her. "Just wait here—I know the way."

He went up the stairs three at a time. Bennett's door was ajar, and he pushed it open with the muzzle of his pistol. The room was empty. He looked out of the open window, and saw immediately the immense difficulty of surrounding a house the back of which looked upon the courtyards of Portland Street. He did not stay to search the room, but ran downstairs again and led the way to the larder beneath which was the concealed chamber. Over this a heavy dresser had been pulled.

"I was afraid of this," said Jimmy, as he helped push it back.

In a second the trap was raised, and, kneeling down, he peered into the void.

"There's somebody here," he said. "Get me a lamp."

One glance he took at the figure huddled in the corner, and then dropped to the floor of the underground vault.

" Come down, two men ! " he shouted. " Mr. Dicker is here ! "

Dicker was unconscious when they pulled him up and laid him on the stone floor of the larder. His face was blue ; he was in the last stages of asphyxiation, and the wonder was that he had lived through the terrible ordeal.

He had not revived when Jimmy called at the hospital at seven o'clock that night, but the report was satisfactory. That he had lived at all was due, as Bill Dicker afterwards confirmed, to the presence in the room of the outlet of a small leaden pipe. Apparently a previous owner had intended to wire the sunken cellar for electric light, and to that end had had a pipe laid to one of the corners of the apartment. The wires had never been fixed, and the leaden pipe served as a life-line. A closer scrutiny of Bennett's room satisfied Jimmy that the man had left in a hurry—though whether he had gone out through the window—it was an easy drop to the ledge below, and thence the way of escape was easy—or whether he had left the house just before the search party had arrived, it was impossible to determine ; the more so, as none of the servants had any very valuable information to give.

A pair of soiled yellow leather gauntlets and a motor-bicycle licence, issued to him in the name of Bennett, were the principal finds. That he was able to keep his mind concentrated upon this new mystery amazed Jimmy in a dull, numb way. Behind his mechanical performance of duty was a heartbreaking terror for which there was no anodyne.

Joan is lost, Joan is lost ! " his brain repeated

"Why are you searching Bennett's room? Why are you sitting here, worrying yourself about this crook, even though he is a triple murderer, when she is calling to you?"

It was ten o'clock when he left his office, a broken, haggard man. He was stepping into his taxi in the courtyard when an officer came running after him.

"Captain Sepping, somebody has been broadcasting this for ten minutes: we're getting telephone messages from all quarters."

Jimmy hurried back into the lighted hall and read the paper which the man had handed to him. The message was brief, but he could have wept for joy as he read it:

> *Tell Captain James Sepping, New Scotland Yard, that I am safe.—Joan.*

Jimmy's legs turned to water and he sat down hurriedly.

"When did this come?" he asked huskily.

"There is the time on the corner, sir—nine-thirty-five and repeated at nine-forty-five, in the intervals between the concert that was broadcasted to-night."

He read the message again, and a great load of anguish rolled from his heart.

"She is safe," he said unsteadily. "Thank you, sergeant."

Safe, but where, and how? He did not trouble to answer those questions as his cab carried him homewards. His heart was singing a song of joyous thanksgiving, and he could have danced, if his weary body would have allowed him.

Albert must have been waiting for him, for, as Jimmy took his key from his pocket, the door opened.

"There's a lady to see you—just come, sir," whispered the man.

"Who is the lady?" said Jimmy, a wild hope surging within him.

"Miss Coleman," said Albert.

Dora! He had almost forgotten her existence, almost forgotten the tragedy which overshadowed her.

She was sitting by the table, her hands clasped before her, her dark eyes shining feverishly.

"Joan is safe," he said, closing the door behind him. "We have just had a wireless."

She nodded.

"Thank God for that!" she breathed. "Thank God for that! Do you know anything more?"

The beautiful eyes searched his face.

"I know that Bennett is Tod Haydn," he said quietly, but her gaze did not shift.

"I am glad you know that, because, if you didn't, I should have had to tell you. Yes, he is Tod."

She said nothing more, until:

"Jimmy, can I sleep here to-night?"

"Sleep here?" he said in surprise. "My dear girl, there are no women in this house: I suppose you realise that?"

"Can I sit up and talk, then?" she asked desperately. "Don't you realise, Jimmy, that Tod will be looking for me? Have you raided the house?"

He nodded.

"And found nothing. Of course, he will think I betrayed him. I couldn't stay at Marlow; I don't know where I can go."

"Of course you can remain here," said Jimmy heartily. "Albert, who is a stickler for the proprieties, will be shocked, but—in fact, I don't care what happens to-night," he said recklessly, and a slow smile dawned on her face.

"Because you have found Joan. Where is she?"

"That I can't tell you," he said, and explained to her how the news had come.

"How curious! Lawford must have been at the same place," she said. "Of course, she is on the yacht."

"Yacht? But there are no yachts on the upper reaches of the Thames."

"They may have taken her to the coast," she persisted. "Lawford told us that he went a three-hour journey before he reached the place of his imprisonment."

"Did he ever tell you anything more than that?" asked Jimmy quickly.

"Little more than he told you. I've thought since that Lawford must have betrayed us all, and that was why he was in such a hurry to get out of the country. I knew nothing of his murder until I was told. I didn't even know that he had committed the unpardonable sin." She changed the conversation abruptly, and when he tried to resume where she had broken off, he found she was not willing to continue.

Jimmy was desperately tired, but the solution of the difficulty was an easy one. He must go to an hotel in the neighbourhood, but to this, however, she would not agree.

"You will leave me with your manservant," she said. "Won't you go to sleep and let me sit up and read?"

"Do you think he will come?"

"I'm certain," she said emphatically, "absolutely certain! He *must* kill me; there is no other way out for him! Don't you realise, Jimmy, that I am the only evidence living against Tod Haydn? Coleman would have betrayed him; he was going with you to Scotland Yard with that object. But Tod knew, followed him and killed him in the street—Tod always uses a silencer."

"If I promise to sit up, will you go to bed?" he asked her, but to this she would not agree.

"I am not sleepy. If I went to bed, I should lie awake, thinking and wondering and fearing. Please, please lie down, Jimmy, and trust me. Is there a fire-escape to this building?" she asked suddenly.

Jimmy did not know, but Albert was well posted on such matters.

"Yes, miss, there is a fire-escape."

"Does the ladder pass anywhere near your windows?" she asked, and an investigation revealed the fact that one of the flights ran so close to the window of Jimmy's bedroom that it could be touched with a stick.

"He will come at two," said the girl calmly. "That is a practice of his—they call him 'Two o'clock Tod' in the—profession. If he doesn't come at two, he won't come at all."

Jimmy made preparations for the night. The girl having refused the offer of his bed, he had a couch made up in the sitting-room, and on this she lay down fully dressed. He had a small settee pulled into the passage, which he wedged up against the door. Here Albert took up his position, whilst Jimmy, going into his room, pulled his own bed from its usual place and brought the head flush with the window overlooking the flat courtyard.

At midnight the lights were extinguished, with the exception of a small lamp in the sitting-room, and Jimmy lay down, very wide awake, for he knew that there was something behind the girl's warning. As two o'clock was striking, he woke with a start. There was a deep silence, broken only by the rumbling of a motor-lorry in the street outside. He had drawn up the blinds before going to bed, so that he commanded a complete sideways view of the window. The last chimes quivered in the air, but nothing happened. Evidently the girl's fear was unfounded. He had reached that decision when a shadow fell on the window—the indefinite, almost invisible shadow which the stars throw.

Jimmy took the pistol from under his pillow and sat waiting. What would be the line of attack? Surely the man would not dare to come into the flat, knowing the girl was there, and believing, if he believed that she had betrayed him, that his visit was expected?

For a minute nothing happened, and Jimmy began to think that his eyes had played a trick, and he had half decided to get up and investigate, when something heavy smashed through his window and fell with a thud to the ground.

Only for a second was Jimmy undecided as to what had happened; and then, shrinking against the wall, he gripped the edge of the mattress and rolled it round him. There came a deafening explosion which lifted him from the bed and dropped him again—an indescribable sound of iron striking wall and ceiling, a pungent stink of exploded cordite, and silence.

CHAPTER XXXVIII

A SECTOR of steel had penetrated the bed and ripped the skin of his arm, but this he did not know till afterwards. He had some difficulty in getting to the floor, for one of the bars of the bed had broken under the fearful impact of the explosion. When he did, he reached out his hand and tried to switch on the light, but that had gone. So had all the lights in the flat, he discovered, and at last he pulled open the maimed and splintered door, and came into the room where Dora was lying.

There was no light here, until Albert came, stumbling, with candles and matches, and then Jimmy went back to survey his room. Not a whole article of furniture in the room remained ; not a pane of glass in the windows. Every square had been cut clean out as if by a knife, and the carpet in the centre of the room was smouldering. This he extinguished with a jug of water ; and whilst Albert was explaining to the startled tenants who flocked up to discover the cause of their discomfort—he found afterwards that a hole had been blown through the ceiling of the flat below, though fortunately nobody had been sleeping in the room beneath him—he stepped gingerly about the shattered room, looking for fragments.

"A Mills bomb," he explained, as he came out to the troubled girl. "Did anything happen in here?"

The wall parallel with his bedroom bulged a little; half a dozen pictures had lost their glass; and a flower-vase had been blown off the table by the force of the concussion.

"Yes, it was a Mills bomb. I thought it was that when I heard it drop on the floor. I remember during the war a fellow dropping a bomb by accident, and it is a sound you do not readily forget."

"He wasn't trying to kill you," said Dora slowly. "He thought I was there."

The clang of fire-bells came from the street below. Some tenant, whose telephone had not been put out of order, had wisely rung the brigade as soon as the sound of the explosion had come to him. The courtyard of the flat was searched, but, as Jimmy expected, there was no sign of the man—he would have been very surprised if there had been.

The damage to his flat was much greater than he had imagined. The electric wires were shattered, water-pipes and gas-pipes broken, fittings everywhere dissipated. Happily, he did not have to explain the presence of Dora Coleman, for firemen and policemen were so intent upon their work that they seemed to accept her presence as natural; and when somebody referred to her as "Mrs. Sepping" he did not trouble to correct the error.

Fortunately, there was a furnished flat on the first floor, the owner of which was abroad, and the janitor, who had been charged with the responsibility of finding a desirable tenant, remembered the vacancy and offered to Jimmy a solution of his domestic problem for which he was truly grateful.

"Unless our friend disturbs us to-morrow night, I think you'll be safe here for a day or two. But to make absolutely sure, I'm going to take effective steps to prevent a repetition of this hilarious evening," said Jimmy.

It was eleven o'clock when he woke, staring round the strange room and wondering how he came to be lying under a sky-blue eiderdown quilt embroidered with pink roses. After he had dressed, he went out into the passage and knocked at the girl's door.

" All right ? " he asked, and, receiving a satisfactory assurance, he went out, not waiting for breakfast.

Bill Dicker had recovered consciousness during the night, but he was still weak, the matron at the hospital told him, and offered the conventional warning.

" Did you get that lad, Jimmy ? " was Dicker's first question.

" No, I didn't get him, but he nearly got me."

" That's not exactly the same thing," growled Bill weakly. " Jimmy, if you go after Haydn, you've got to remember that you're dealing with a real wild beast. And, Jimmy, you've got to down him before he downs you ! He has three murders behind him, and the grey doors of the death-house in front of him. And they can only hang him once ! It is better to figure in the witness-box than on the indictment as one of the late departed victims of this bright boy."

" The matron says if you talk too much you'll have a relapse, but you must tell me how you got in that infernal dark hole."

" He pushed me there. He thoroughly deceived me with a beautiful story of how he had discovered an outlet to the underground room, and, like a fool, I went down. I had just reached the bottom when the trap dropped, and I knew just where I'd been stung. I'm not proud of that achievement," he said ruefully.

Jimmy nodded.

"Bennett collected all the letters he had probably left behind him in Coleman's room, and brought them on to Scotland Yard with a story that deceived *me*! Altogether a plausible liar. And a minor mystery is explained, Dicker—the reason 'Bennett' did not hear the policeman shouting before he went upstairs. The explanation is that Bennett was not in the house! He must have come in after the policeman, and was standing at the bottom of the stairs when the officer came down. The story of his having been drugged was, of course, all moonshine. Bennett was the supreme boss of the gang. I remember now little Nippy telling me how he insisted upon everybody playing their part, even when there was no onlooker—he played it mighty well!"

Here the watchful and anxious matron intervened, and Jimmy had to take a hurried adieu.

He went home to lunch, which was not a usual practice of his, but he was anxious about Dora, and all the time was wondering whether, in his absence, Tod Haydn would find a way of getting at her.

She was brighter and more her normal self. A night's sleep had brought a remarkable change, though the bruises still showed, and the skin about one eye was discoloured.

"The brute!" said Jimmy, when she had described in a few vivid words the method of Mr. Tod Haydn with obstinate women.

"It might have been worse," said the girl quietly, "infinitely worse. He might have fallen in love with me, and that would have been fatal for me, for I should have killed him. I suppose you haven't heard any more about him ?"

Jimmy shook his head.

"And you won't," she said decidedly. "Tod is not an ordinary outlaw. He's a clever actor, a brilliant strategist ; he has a dozen bolts to which he can go if he is hard pressed."

"Do you know any of them ?"

She thought for a while.

"Yes, I know some, but don't ask me. I'm not thinking about him. I'm thinking about myself. I believe you will get him. I don't want to be responsible for his capture unless . . ."

"And you don't want him to get away with Rex Walton's million ?" said Jimmy.

To his amazement the girl laughed.

"Rex Walton's million is no longer in the hands of Kupie," she said.

"Then who has it ?" asked Jimmy.

Rex has it," said the girl.

CHAPTER XXXIX

TOD HAYDN stopped at the corner of Lower Regent Street and bought a newspaper. Then he strolled along Piccadilly and turned into a fashionable restaurant. When Dora had described him as a good actor she had done less than justice to his extraordinary histrionic gifts. Nobody who had read the more faithful than flattering description of the wanted man that appeared in large type in all the evening newspapers would have recognised in that debonair man about town the "man of 33, slightly grey at the temples, clean-shaven, square-jawed," etc. A small moustache ornamented his upper lip; the grey had disappeared from his hair; and the bushy eyebrows had gone altogether, having been replaced by a thin line of hair that met over his nose.

He read the description of himself, folded the paper and threw it under the table. Then he ordered his dinner with great care, for he was something of an epicurean and poor Coleman's supposed fastidiousness in the matter of food was due entirely to the requirements of his chauffeur.

His dinner eaten at his leisure, he came out, and, after letting a number of the more decrepit specimens pass, hailed a brand-new taxicab and gave the driver instructions.

"Take me up to Bond Street, and don't stop till I tell you," he said. "You need not go too fast."

A third of the way up Old Bond Street was a doorway which he knew well. It led to a set of chambers above a tailor's shop. He glanced quickly from left to right. A man was leaning nonchalantly against a lamp-post a few paces from the door; another idler stood on the other pavement. Haydn grinned, and did not signal the cab to stop. So she had told?

He felt no particular resentment against Dora Coleman. To prevent her talking he would have killed her without remorse; but as he had not killed her he expected no more than that she should inform the police of the places where he was likely to be found. That she had told the police nothing, and that they had found at least three of his haunts without her assistance, he did not know.

When the cab reached Oxford Street he leant out of the window.

"Go along Maida Vale until I tell you to stop."

There was a small house in this wide thoroughfare which had a particular interest for Tod Haydn, and as he approached the place he keenly scrutinised the sidewalk. Next door to the house he was seeking, a man was standing against the gate smoking. He was a tall man, in a hard Derby hat, and he seemed to be waiting for somebody. Beyond the house were two other men, talking together, and again the stamp was unmistakable. At the end of the road Haydn gave an order and, doubling back in his tracks, he came to the corner of a fashionable square, tipped the driver liberally and walked a hundred yards down Wigmore Street, turning off into a mews. Here, he knew, he was safe, and although there were certain very necessary articles to be procured from his other hiding-places, he could do his work with the machinery at his disposal.

He changed quickly into a faded green livery coat, attached to which was a cabman's badge, and putting on an old cap he went down to the garage beneath. The solitary vehicle in the place was a taxicab, which was Haydn's property and to which a licence had been duly issued. After a brief examination of the petrol tank he stacked four tins on the railed roof, opened the door of the garage, and brought his car into the cobbled roadway. He only stopped long enough to lock up the garage, and then he rode off at a steady pace, making for the west of London. He passed through the suburbs of Hammersmith and Barnes, moving on toward Staines. Somebody hailed him—a man and a woman who had come out of one of the big houses on the Staines Road. He smiled and went on, but pulled down the flag of his meter, and rather wondered at himself that he had not taken that elementary precaution before.

Beyond Staines a road runs parallel to the river. Here there are few houses, and the sloping meadowland runs uninterruptedly to the water's edge. He reached a place where there was a clump of trees just off the road, and unerringly he drove the cab into the very centre, extinguished the lights, and taking off his coat, which he folded and put on the driver's seat, replaced the coat by a tight black jacket.

His last act before he switched off the lights was to examine an ugly-looking automatic, which he placed carefully in his belt under his waistcoat. This time, with another look round, he stepped briskly along the river path toward Maidenhead.

He had visited the place that afternoon, knew almost to an inch the position of the barge, and had located the skiff he would employ for his purpose. It was eleven o'clock when he came opposite an island, by the side of which lay a long slab of blackness. Against the sky he saw its tapering mainmast, which had been raised since he had seen it that afternoon. It was from this mast, as he knew, that the wireless aerial was stretched. "*Dora!*" he chuckled silently.

Twelve o'clock chimed from a distant church. There was no sign of life on the barge, and Tod Haydn, sitting on the bank, his arms clasped about his knees, his keen, cat-like eyes watching the craft ceaselessly, knew that the hour had come for his attempt. And the attempt must be successful this time.

He walked along the path a little farther until he came to a small creek, which was bridged over for the benefit of foot passengers. On the land side the creek wound tortuously for a hundred yards before it swerved round to rejoin the river some distance away. He had not more than a dozen yards to go before he found the skiff he had hidden in the rushes. The creek was too narrow to float him and the boat, and he stepped into the water and pushed it before him until he had passed under the bridge and water came up to above his knees. Then he stepped gingerly aboard and pushed off with a boat-hook. Hereabouts the river is not deep, and he could punt his way across.

Stealthily he progressed, making no sound. Presently he shipped the boat-hook and, reaching out, touched the side of the barge. Here he waited for fully five minutes, listening. He heard nothing, and tying the painter of the boat to a ring-bolt, he climbed silently to the deserted deck and, crouching low, went stealthily forward until he came parallel with a covered hatchway, closed by two small doors. He stooped and listened, then pressed gently. The door was fastened by a very simple catch, and slipping a knife from his pocket he lifted the frail security without noise or difficulty.

A dim light burnt at the bottom of the short flight of steps which confronted him. Again he listened intently, and his hearing was amazingly acute. The dynamo was not working, he thought; they were running the lights from the accumulator. His rubber-soled shoes made no sound as he descended the stairs to a narrow ante-room, panelled with rosewood. The electric fittings were of silver, and silver were the handles of two doors which led from the apartment. He tried one, and the door opened a fraction of an inch. Nothing to disturb the quietness. He pushed it open a little farther.

He was now in a larger room, furnished with a luxurious couch, two arm-chairs and a table. There came to him now the sound of voices speaking in low tones. He crept nearer and listened. Yes, it was he and the girl! He thumbed up his waistcoat and drew his Browning with a gesture that was almost a caress. Now he pushed open the second door . . . an inch . . . a foot. . . . He had a clear view of the great saloon, with its low, carved ceiling, its silken hangings, and its beauty of furnishing and fixtures.

Before the flower-decked fire-place was a settee, occupied by a man and a girl, whose backs were toward the intruder. They were talking in a low voice, so low that his keen ears could catch no more than a scrap of their talk. Nearer and nearer he crept, and the thick carpet would have deadened all sound even if he had not been wearing his silent shoes.

"It was Bennett, of course," the man was saying. "Wells was certain he recognised his voice when he pulled you on board, Joan. The question is, did Bennett guess that the barge was mine? I think it would have been wiser if Wells had put you ashore almost immediately."

"I feel safer here," said Joan, and turned quickly at the gentle chuckle behind her.

"Keep your hands where they are," said Bennett, the barrel of his pistol resting on the back of the settee. "Mr. Rex Walton, I believe?"

Rex Walton did not answer.

CHAPTER XL

"WHERE are the rest of your crowd ?" asked Tod Haydn.

"They've gone ashore," said Walton shortly.

Haydn's lip curled in an ugly grin.

"I hope, for your sake, that they went empty-handed, Walton," he said ; "and if by any chance they took what I'm looking for, you will sleep this night in the river ! You can sit down."

Rex did not move. His sombre gaze met the intruder's without flinching.

"I suppose I've been rather careless," he drawled. "I should have expected this visit. In fact, I did. Where are *your* friends ?"

"In hell," said Haydn with a malignity which sent a shiver through the girl's frame.

"I mean Coleman——"

"Coleman is dead," said the man coolly, "and I was hoping that I should be able to tell you that your lady-love was dead also. But dear Mrs. Walton is alive. By the way, she *is* Mrs. Walton, isn't she ?" he asked with an assumption of innocence. "Anyway, she's alive. I congratulate you. You ought to be very happy. I can only hope that she's more use to you than she has been to me. She's been a quitter since the game started. She wanted to quit when I sent a letter to your first lady-love—Edith something or other; and then she wanted to quit after I'd fixed up an introduction to you and the marriage was arranged. She's been quitting ever since. I'm afraid she's just a poor, commonplace crook, without imagination or enterprise." He laid the pistol down on the broad top of the settee, took out a cigarette and lit it. "I'll give you a few tips about Julia," he said flippantly; "or shall I call her Dora? By the way, you will have to re-name your barge. You've got to treat her rough—and that applies to most women. Spare the rod and spoil the wife, eh?" He picked up the Browning, and, without warning, his tone changed. "I'm thirsty," he said. "I want some of that fine '58 port."

"It has gone ashore."

"You're a liar," said the other. "It is here, on this barge, and you'll lead me to it."

"I'll lead you nowhere," said Rex Walton, his face white with anger.

"Then I shall shoot this young woman; and I'm not threatening for the sake of creating a sensation. You understand? If you refuse to lead me to those wine boxes, she's dead. And if you show fight I'll get you, and I'll take a chance of finding what I am looking for without assistance. Is that plain to you?"

Rex Walton knew the man and his cold-blooded methods, and had no doubt that he would put his threat into execution.

"I will count three," Haydn went on, "and if at the end of that time you are still of the same mind——"

"I'll save you the trouble of counting," said Rex. "You will not want my sister?"

"On the contrary, I shall want her very badly," said the other suavely. " Under no circumstances will I leave her here to give an alarm. Step ahead, and step lively!"

With a gesture to the girl, Rex moved slowly across the room, the way the intruder had come. They passed through the two ante-rooms, and Walton took a key from his pocket and opened a door under the stairway. He put out his hand and switched on the light, and the man who stood closely behind him, the muzzle of his gun within half an inch of Walton's waist, saw yet another door set in a bulkhead. This Walton opened, passing through into a small store-room, and at the sight of two boxes lying in the centre of the floor Tod Haydn's eyes glittered.

" You can carry one back to the saloon," he said, " and you," he nodded to the girl, " can carry the other."

" It is impossible for my sister to carry a heavy box," said Walton hotly.

" Let her try," was the laconic reply. " Show her how to move it corner to corner."

Without a word the girl lifted the heavy box, and, exerting all her strength, dragged it towards their tormentor. After ten minutes' labour, which left her hot and breathless, the two cases were back in the saloon.

" Open the first," said Haydn. " I see your friends have already broken it."

Silently Rex lifted the lid. There was a packing of straw, which he removed, and beneath apparently lay half a dozen bottles in straw jackets, side by side.

" Stand back a few paces," warned Haydn, " and don't move."

With his eyes upon his captives he stooped and, with no effort, lifted the dummy lid, for dummy it was. Beneath, in a tin-lined receptacle, bundle after bundle of thousand-dollar notes were tightly packed. He drew them out one by one, and from his pocket produced a stout silk bag, into which he dropped them. Then he opened the second case and repeated his performance until the bag was filled. He drew a cord tightly round the mouth of the sack, knotted it, and straightened his back.

"That's that," he said. "And now I am afraid that I cannot afford to leave you to tell stories about the wicked Tod Haydn."

Joan could not mistake the sinister meaning of his words. From the first she had expected no other ending to this visitation, and now, with the end in sight, she braced herself to meet the fate that awaited her.

"That means, I suppose, that you're going to do a little shooting?" said Rex. His voice was very calm. "I suppose you know that one of your confederates has made a statement, which I have in my possession?"

"Which confederate?" asked Haydn quickly.

"Mr. Lawford Collett—though I don't know why I should satisfy your curiosity. I've enough evidence to hang you, Haydn."

"In which case," said the other with a thin smile, "we will add that interesting document to our collection. You're probably bluffing——"

"Bluffing!" said Walton. "Look here." There was a tiny polished wood cupboard projecting from the wall, and without hesitation he pulled it open. If he had shown any fear, Haydn would have known. "There it is," he said.

There was a click, and all the lights in the saloon went out.

"Drop!" he shouted, and flung himself at his enemy's legs.

Twice, three times Haydn's gun went off, and the noise of the explosion in that confined space deafened the girl. She had dropped upon her hands and knees, and now she crawled in the direction of the fire-place and whatever cover the settee afforded. She heard the struggle of the two men in the darkness, and guessed that Rex had reached his objective. For once Haydn was taken by surprise, and before he knew what had happened he had been tackled low and brought to the floor. In another minute Rex Walton's knee was on his pistol arm, and his strong hands at the murderer's throat.

The strength of the desperado was incredible. Recovering from the first shock of surprise, he twisted free of the grip that held him, and now he had to depend upon his hands, for the pistol had been wrenched from his grasp. He struck out desperately. One chance blow caught Rex on the jaw and momentarily knocked him out. Before he could recover, the man had wrenched himself clear and was groping on the floor for his weapon.

Then Joan spoke quickly, entreatingly. She spoke in French, and Haydn was no linguist. As he found his pistol, there was a quick rush of feet and the thud of a door. He staggered to the wall, felt for the switch and flooded the room with light. It was empty.

He flew to the door that was flush with the fire-place, and threw himself against it, but this was locked.

Walton had gone to his cabin, and in his cabir he would find the means of protecting himself. There was no time to be lost. He picked up the sack and, throwing it to his shoulder, ran up the gangway on to the deck.

The change from the light of the room below to the darkness of the night was so sudden as to blind him effectually; but after a while he began to pick out objects, and moved unerringly to the place where he had left the boat. He was untying the painter when the sound of quick footsteps on the companion-way came to him, and he turned and, putting up his hands, pulled a long cane from under his collar—a cane which Tod kept in a specially contrived pocket that ran down his spine. It was the " cosh "—a weapon in the use of which he was an expert.

As Walton reached the head of the stairs Tod struck home, and Rex fell to his knees, his revolver clattering to the deck. For a second the man hesitated, his stick half poised for the second blow; and then, turning, he ran back to the boat, threw in the sack and dropped to safety. Another second and he was poling across the river to the opposite bank. Scrambling to land, he kicked the boat loose, and, with the sack on his shoulder, walked quickly back the way he had come.

He reached the clump of bushes and found the cab. Bundling the sack through the open window, he started up the engine and, stopping only to change his jacket, jumped into the seat and backed out with amazing skill, for his mudguard did not so much as scrape the trunks of the thickly-planted trees.

He was on the road now. A quarter of an hour later he was passing through Staines, and as the clock was striking two he had headed the cab into the garage.

" A good night's work," thought Tod Haydn with satisfaction as he put on the lights and turned to secure his booty.

One step he took, and then stood stock still. A man was leaning out of the window of the cab, and in his hand was something which brought Tod Haydn's hands up above his head.

"And keep them there!" said Jimmy Sepping as he opened the door and stepped leisurely to the floor.

CHAPTER XLI

"I DON'T claim any credit for capturing you," said Jimmy. "It was Nippy Knowles who saw the car—he was taking me to the barge. What happened there ?" he asked sternly.

"You'll find out in time," growled the other as he held out his hands.

As the second cuff was snapped on his wrists he asked for a cigarette.

"And a match too, I suppose ?" said Jimmy sarcastically. "And an open tin of petrol at your feet, eh ?"

He unlocked the door of the garage and swung his prisoner outside, and there were more people in the yard than Haydn had ever seen before at that hour of the morning.

"Here is your man, inspector," said Jimmy.

"Where was Knowles ?" Haydn broke his silence just before he was being led away.

"We were both in the plantation, and had just discovered your car when you came up. If you had opened the door you would have been arrested earlier ; but I preferred to take you in the Metropolitan area—it saves complications."

When Jimmy reached Scotland Yard he heard excellent news. Nippy's message was that Rex Walton had been stunned, but not seriously hurt, and the girl was unharmed.

It was not till the afternoon that Rex Walton, back again amidst the familiar surroundings of his study, told the story of the missing million.

"It was about a month before poor Edie died that I got to know Coleman—whose real name, by the way, is Adolph Vermeuil. He was born of French parents in England, and was an international crook of some standing, though he operated very little in England, as you will discover when you look him up. Coleman, as I will continue to call him, worked at the Treasury, under circumstances of which you are probably aware. After Edie's death I got to know Coleman better, and he invited me to his house, where I met Dora, and came—to love her. I ought to pretend that it was less than love. To-day, in spite of her duplicity, in spite of her association with this terrible gang, I have nothing but sorrow for her—sorrow and gratitude, for undoubtedly she risked her life to save Joan, and for a long time kept the gang in ignorance as to the reason why I had made my seemingly extraordinary disappearance.

"I had heard of Kupie, of course, but only as a member of the general public would hear of a blackmailer's activities. I never dreamt that I should come under his notice. For a long time I received no letter, and for a good reason. The gang had decided not to take a few thousands from me, but to take every penny I had. When at last the letters began to arrive they were couched in a peculiar and unusual tone, and they threatened, not exposure of some of my past misdeeds, but my ruin, unless I gave up Dora Coleman.

"The objects of those letters are now apparent. They were twofold. Their first was to stiffen me in my determination to marry the girl—for they must have known something of my character, or, for the matter of that, the character of any decent man. The second object was to create in my mind an atmosphere of uneasiness as to my fortune. Here they succeeded. Very foolishly—I was in rather a nervous state at the time—I consulted Coleman, and he it was who fostered my fears and told me amazing stories of Kupie's methods—tales which he said he had heard in confidence at the Treasury, and which I promised him I would in no circumstances discuss with any other person.

" Coleman, of course, was an instrument of Tod Haydn's, who had planned the most daring confidence trick of all time. Their plot was to induce me to liquidate all my securities and to place the money in Coleman's 'safe deposit.' He told me stories which, in my lunacy, I believed, of secret Government arrangements for the deposit of securities and money in case of revolution. He even went so far as to say that the real reserves of some of the great banks were kept in secret hiding-places beneath certain private houses—which he obligingly pointed out to me one day!

" You may think that I was a champion fool—I was. The record of every confidence trick, when it comes into the cold light of police investigation, shows the victim as an imbecile, and the trick which deprives him of his money as crude and one which any sane man would detect. But those who have been in the hands of confidence men know that it is not the story they tell, but the atmosphere that they create, which enables them to make their biggest coups.

" Here was a man living in an expensive house in one of the most exclusive thoroughfares in London—a man who was a Government official and, so far as I knew, had been a Government official all his life; a man who talked of millions and hundreds of millions carelessly, as you and I talk of hundreds. And add to that the fascination which his alleged daughter exercised upon me, and my faith in her loyalty and sincerity.

"I have had a long time to think about those early days, but I cannot recall a single instance when Dora helped either Coleman or her other employer by offering me advice. Indeed, all the advice I received from her was in the direction of caution; and I now believe that here, too, she was perfectly honest, and that she was trying to warn me without incurring the punishment which she knew would follow a discovery.

"I drew the money from the bank, and delivered in three parcels the American bills I received in exchange. When they were all deposited, Coleman gave me what he called a 'Treasury receipt'—on, as I remember, a particularly thick and rough-faced paper."

"Do you remember the wording of the receipt?" asked Jimmy. "It had the word 'custody' in it, did it not? I only saw the letters 'tody,' but I guessed that was what it was."

Rex nodded.

"'Received for safe custody' was the wording, and, to give me extra confidence, the paper bore the stamped seal of the Treasury. It was fairly easy, of course, for Coleman to put a blank sheet of paper under a Treasury die; and when I tell you, in addition, that the receipt had the Treasury address printed on the top, you will find some excuse for me.

"The money was transferred, but the letters continued to come in; and then I married Julia, as you know, on the day before the actual date fixed for the wedding. I intended marrying her for the second time at Marylebone, but I was panic-stricken at the thought that I might possibly lose her.

" When I came to Portland Place on that unhappy day, I brought with me a wedding present for my bride, and it was my idea to slip it in her dressing-case and let her find it when we reached our destination. Accordingly, at the appointed hour, I went up to my room, took the jewel from the small attaché case which I had brought to the house and had sent up to the room that had been placed at my disposal, and went into Dora's, hoping that her dressing-bag or some other small baggage was open. As it happened, her dressing-bag was on the bed. I opened the lid, slipped the case under a silk dressing-gown. As I did so, my fingers touched a letter and brought it into view. It was addressed to me, but unsealed. For a moment I hesitated. Was it intended that I should read it ? But curiosity overcame me, and made me do a thing which I would have regarded ordinarily as dishonourable. I took out the letter from the bag and read. The moment my eyes fell on the writing I knew it was from Kupie. It ran :

> *You have married Dora and have placed your money in the custody of Coleman. For all his strong-room, we shall take that money to-night.*

Pinned to the envelope was a note in a different handwriting, which ran :

> *Dora to put this on his pillow to-night. Car will pick up Dora. She will leave for Budapest via Harwich, until affair blows over. We will watch Walton ; if he gives trouble we will fix him.*

"It takes a longer time to tell than it took me to read. I knew now that I had been tricked and was penniless. My first impulse was to go back to the dining-room and denounce these scoundrels. But what proof had I? I remembered then the receipt that I had placed in the drawer of my desk; but I knew also that this gang would stop at nothing to prevent my recovering the money. I went half-way downstairs to the landing, and, acting on an impulse, I opened the door that led to the courtyard. With every step I took I realised the danger of my position, and long before I met my valet by accident, I had made up my mind what I would do. I had planned for Dora a unique honeymoon trip. Years ago I had a barge fitted up with all the care and luxury which is associated with a private yacht. It was a motor-barge, and I had a great deal of fun and enjoyed wonderful, though solitary, holidays, touring the canals and rivers of the country.

"Wells was my chauffeur and chief engineer, and when I suggested that he should come with me, and told him of the plot, he agreed."

"When Albert saw you last year," interrupted Jimmy, "with a week's growth of beard and dressed roughly, you were on your barge holiday?"

Rex nodded.

"I remember seeing Albert, and I was scared lest he gave away my guilty secret! Yes, I was on the barge then. I re-named her *Dora* for the honeymoon, and it was my intention to sail her with the aid of a man I should pick up *en route*. I had done all I could to make the holiday a happy one for Dora. I had fixed a wireless set and obtained a special broadcasting licence, and one of the things I had planned for my honeymoon was to instruct her in its working.

"I don't think I was quite sane when I went away. I saw nothing in perspective. But when I realised how Joan would be worrying, I tried to telephone her, without success. My object was to get the money back. I had no doubt in my mind that something had already happened to the receipt; and I delayed moving in that matter until Wells urged me to let him telephone to you. The receipt, of course, was destroyed; I learnt that the morning after it happened. My first attempt to enter the house in Portland Place——"

"Then *you* were the first burglar?"

Rex nodded.

"I was the first burglar," he said. "Nippy Knowles was the second. The first attempt was a failure, and I was nearly caught. The second attempt was carried out by Nippy, to whom I explained all the circumstances."

"But why not come to the police, Mr. Walton?" asked the convalescent Bill Dicker, an interested audience.

"What would the police have done? Who would have believed my fantastic story? I doubt if a magistrate would have granted a search warrant on my evidence. To reach either you or Joan was impossible. I had made a reconnaissance of both the house in Cadogan Place and your flat, and I saw that they were too well guarded for me to reach you. After giving the matter thought, I decided that it was best to work on my own. Then it was I remembered Knowles, and, after patient inquiry, I located him and brought him to the barge, explaining exactly what I wanted. The money was somewhere in the house; and, to make sure that it should not be taken away, Knowles enlisted a few dubious characters he numbered amongst his acquaintance. These kept watch, and examined practically every large package that left the house. The burglary was successful. The house was empty, for Bennett was away on one of his raids and Coleman was staying at the hotel."

"How did you know the money was in the wine boxes?"

Rex Walton smiled.

"I knew of the cellar, that was enough. Dora had told me in an unguarded moment, and from her anxiety to correct her blunder I guessed that the underground room was a secret which for some reason the family wished to keep. At any rate, that cellar was our objective. At first I thought we had drawn blank, until Nippy insisted upon opening one of the cases and examining the contents. And then the hiding-place was found. We got the cases out of the house, loaded them on to a car, and we were well away before Bennett returned."

"You captured Lawford Collett," said Jimmy, "but he told us that he went a three hours' journey. Were you at sea?"

Walton shook his head.

"No. In fact we were at Richmond. The car drove around the country for three hours in order to fool him. Collett was scared when he saw me, and after one futile attempt to communicate with the outside world he told us all he knew, on the promise that we would assist him to leave the country. I have his signed statement. Collett was one of the gang; he was on the verge of bankruptcy and exposure when Coleman picked him up. He had misapplied the money of a client and was expecting a warrant for his arrest. And that is all.

"By an odd coincidence, Joan, who was escaping from Haydn, smashed her launch against the barge.

Knowles and I were away at the time; in fact we were committing the burglary at Portland Place. It was Wells who recognised her voice and pulled her on board, just as these men were reaching for her. They were so taken aback that they made off, and it was then that Haydn must have guessed the secret of my hiding-place."

* * * * *

Dora was in the sitting-room of Jimmy Sepping's new flat, a book on her lap, her eyes fixed on the stream of traffic which passed the building, her mind so completely occupied that she was blind and deaf to all sight and sound. She heard the door open, but did not turn.

"I want nothing, Albert," she said.

"It isn't Albert," said a voice, and she rose to her feet, pale and shaking.

Rex Walton came slowly toward her, at a loss for words.

"Sepping says he can keep you out of this case now Haydn is dead."

"Dead?"

He nodded.

"He committed suicide in his cell last night," he said.

Her restless fingers twined and intertwined one about the other; her grave eyes were fixed on his.

"Then I can go?" she said. "I suppose you'll have to divorce me," she added after a pause. "We are legally married, aren't we?"

He nodded again.

"He won't be able to keep me out of that case," she smiled faintly. "I am very sorry—Rex."

"Sorry—for whom?"

"For you," she said. "For myself—a whole lot. I'm sorry I hurt you so much, and that I hurt the woman you loved so terribly. I'm sorry for it all. I'm sorry most for you. Will you forgive me?"

She put out her hand and he took it, holding it in both of his.

"I don't see how you can keep me out of the case —unless I run away," she said. "I should like to do that, Rex."

"Where would you go?"

She shook her head.

"I don't know—to Vienna—Rome—I have a little money—honest money, although you'll never believe that."

There was a long silence, and then Rex spoke.

"Perhaps it would be as well," he said; "but you must give me your address, and after the inquiries have finished I will come to you, and we will take up life where we put it down—at the door of the Chelsea Registrar's Office."

Her eyes fell and he saw her lips quiver.

"Do you mean that?" she asked in a low voice.

Rex Walton took her in his arms and kissed her.

THE END

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